FIELD

FIELD

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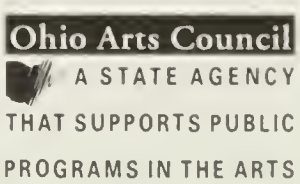

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RAINER MARIA RILKE

A *FIELD* SYMPOSIUM

RAINER MARIA RILKE: A *FIELD* SYMPOSIUM

This symposium fills a gap. On the one hand, we have been presenting translations of Rilke since 1971, when *FIELD* #5 began a serialized presentation of *The Duino Elegies*, two to an issue. On the other hand, we've been organizing these symposia since 1979, and have already collected eighteen of them in the recent volume, *Poets Reading*. We were almost startled to realize that we had never done a symposium on Rilke.

While this symposium marks no particular anniversary, it comes at a time when interest in Rilke continues to generate a very lively dialogue among contemporary poets, American poets in particular. Translations abound. Opinions, pro and con, are thick on the ground. And it's clear that what Rilke means to us as a predecessor, one of the first of the great modernists, now almost a century away, is still being discussed, determined, and imagined. In the past couple of years we've had, just to name a few instances, Louise Glück accusing Rilke of sponsoring American poetry's narcissism; Eric Torgersen's book on Rilke's complicated relationship with Paula Modersohn-Becker; William Gass displaying an odd combination of irreverence and worship in his *Reading Rilke*, a book of lively prose and clunky translations; and a set of new translations by Galway Kinnell (*The Essential Rilke*) and by Edward Snow (*Duino Elegies*). Sales of Rilke translations, as Oberlin College Press, which carries two titles, *The Unknown Rilke* (Franz Wright) and *The Book of Fresh Beginnings* (David Young), can readily testify, continue to be brisk, especially for poetry.

Rilke's detractors, armed with biographical information, are fond of calling attention to the discrepancies between his personal life and the ideals he shaped in his poems. But which of the great modernists has escaped the scrutiny that moves artists from idols to flawed and interesting individuals? Pound is long since scaled down from the heroic to the pathetic. So is Eliot. Yeats's absurdities have been carefully set out. Frost, Neruda, Montale, Williams, Stevens, and Moore—all of them had their shameful

moments. Rilke's shortcomings are old news, mostly fodder for journalists who don't know quite what to say about the poems.

There's a cultist air, too, around this poet. The habit of pointing out his foibles is surely a reaction, at least in part, to the urge some naïve readers have exhibited to convert him into some sort of spiritual guru. That he encouraged this, both by his priestly sense of the poet's vocation and by writing and publishing such documents as *Letters to a Young Poet*, is undeniable.

But Rilke as New Age totem is old news as well. And it's clear, from this symposium and from other recent discussions, that poets read him for very different reasons. They are interested in his unusual ways with metaphor, in his handling of gender issues that bear on poetic identity and on the fate of the modern self, and in the accomplishments whereby he transformed himself from a fairly typical Symbolist into a vigorous, innovative modernist.

It's no accident, then, that these essays concentrate themselves around the crucial years when Rilke made that transformation, during the first decade of the twentieth century. The earliest poem treated here is from 1903, the latest from 1908. They belong to the time when Rilke, in Paris mostly and struggling with issues of life and art, experienced a productivity matched only by his great creative outburst after World War One, the one that resulted in *The Duino Elegies* and *The Sonnets to Orpheus*. The foundation of that later miraculous accomplishment, as these essays make clear, was carefully laid in the Paris years. It came, in large part, out of encounters with visual artists (particularly Rodin, Cézanne, Van Gogh and Modersohn-Becker) which led him to innovations in poetic form and poetic metaphor that remain his most significant contributions to modernist poetry.

A word about translations is in order here. We have used David Young's versions of Rilke as our main poetic texts. He is, after all, our "house" translator of this poet. One exception is "Leda," presented in the version by Edward Snow, one of Rilke's most capable and productive translators. Another, less visible at first, is the fact that the two discussions of the long poem, "Requiem for a Friend," the Rilke poem that has provoked so much

interest in recent years, are based on two other translations. Carol Muske's cites Stephen Mitchell's, and Eric Torgersen's cites his own, which was presented first as an appendix in his fine study, *Dear Friend: Rainer Maria Rilke and Paula Modersohn-Becker*. So three versions of that remarkable poem make their various appearances here. If we had room, we would print all three in their entirety.

At the risk of appearing obvious, we want to applaud the variety and quality of Rilke translations now available to contemporary readers. If you do not read this poet in the original language, the next best thing is to have more than one version to consult. Thus the work of M. D. Herter Norton, Edward Snow, Stephen Mitchell, Robert Bly, Al Poulin, and Galway Kinnell, among others, is a matter for celebration rather than rivalry. Readers are urged to look at *all* the existing versions of "Requiem," as well as any other Rilke text they may be strongly interested in. Whatever preferences they may develop, the result must necessarily be a fuller acquaintance with the poem in question. Rilke's entry into the public domain, making him widely available to translators, has done more to make him our contemporary than anything else that has been said and done in the last twenty-five years.

CHILDHOOD

School time runs on and on with anxiousness
and boredom, full of pauses, full of pointless things.
Oh solitude, oh slow and heavy hours. . .
And then outside: the streets glisten and ring
and in the squares the fountains play
and in the gardens all the world grows huge. —
And one runs through it all in a small suit
quite differently than others go, or went —:
Oh wonderful, odd moments, oh heavy hours,
oh solitude.

And looking out so far and seeing things:
men and women, men, men, women,
and children who are different, brightly dressed,
and there a house, and now and then a dog
and fear that can turn quietly to trust —:
oh sadness with no sense, oh dream, oh horror,
oh bottomless abyss.

And so to play: ball and top and hoop
in gardens that are softly losing color,
and sometimes to brush past adults,
blind and unruly from a game of tag,
but quieted by nightfall, walking home
with stiff little steps, held firmly by the hand —:
Oh always more elusive comprehension,
oh fear, oh heavy weight.

And hours at a time by the big gray pond,
kneeling with a little sailboat there;
and to forget it because those other sails
more interesting than yours are cutting circles,
and then to have to think about the small white
face that sank away and shone out from the pond:
oh childhood, oh disappearing images,
where to? where to?

translated by David Young

Lee Upton

TRACE-MARKS

Childhood doesn't resist description; it swallows description. Childhood calls up our desires to delineate its qualities, yet description cannot return us to childhood's liminal strangeness. Perhaps description cannot account for the experience of being a child because childhood is an action that we cannot entirely re-experience once we have aged out of its provinces. Rather than describing the elusive feeling-states of childhood, Rilke's "Childhood" enacts the perceptual states of childhood. The poem reacquaints us with the sense of what it is to be in the place of childhood, the undefended place where phenomena loom large.

Childhood is a land with seemingly tight borders because of the scheduled protections of adults. Yet childhood is also the land, perhaps somewhat like very old age, that glimpses borderlessness: non-being and non-sense. Feeling in Rilke's poem is widely variable, assuming moments of bliss and trust, but dissolving toward turbulent uncertainty when seemingly the earth is not under our feet and the depth of being has no ground: *"o Tiefe ohne Grund."*

We cannot keep our childhoods, nor presumably would we wish to, but we do retain the trace-marks of childhood's loss, trace-marks that may be felt through Rilke's poem. There is a cut, a channel in the soft tissues within the skull, where the poem circles.

First published in the 1906 edition of *Das Buch der Bilder*, "Childhood" positions the reader inside a way of apprehending in which time is particularly mystifying. Childhood, the poem reminds us, is heavy with time. Never again will time, unless under conditions of acute suffering, be lived in such a way that we feel its density so fully. Because we come to Rilke's poem safe from our childhoods, we cannot fully enter the perceptual field of childhood. The result is that while reading the poem we experience yet again our removal from our earlier self. But this estrangement in our temporal sense works within us in a paradoxical manner. The poem, after all, wants us to allow strangeness,

our sense of difference, to infiltrate us. The prick of discomfort that we may feel performs as a small mimicking psychic event that may recall us to childhood's larger estrangement when we have yet to grow meaning over phenomena—before we sprout the fine down of our protective expectations.

Rilke is the poet of the great romance and horror of childhood in which the child must struggle to orient himself. The child attempts to surround himself with reliable sensory indicators. He counts men and women. He notices what other children wear. His methods are useful only to a point but relentlessly applied. He lists. He compares. What's large? What's small? What's different? What's the same? Who matches the child? Who differs? My three-year-old to a man in middle-age: "You have old skin. I have fresh skin."

"Childhood" has a pulse, a returning action. Things move, glisten, grow. Space and time open, widening to allow the child to recognize his own separateness. The child gathers the emerging self in the time of solitude, clutching the power of the circle of the self.

Through its repeated insistent sound effects and images of roundedness, its gardens and fountains, the poem is made of circles. The playthings of the child are circular: ball, top, hoop. The sailboat is "cutting circles" in the pond, which is itself another circle. The circle of the child's face disappears in the pond's circle, inscribing an inward movement, cutting circles upon the mind. Implicit here are the many luminous rings of Rilke's poems: his Spanish dancer, his carousel, his bowl of roses, as well as the pressured dynamism of animate roundedness—whirling, brimming, rippling.

Rilke's poetry gives the impression of an intimacy that hardly seems lost in translation, which may be why his poems are so frequently translated and why they are responded to with such enduring gratitude even by readers who know him only in translation. His poetry seems to survive translation, perhaps because the poems themselves are about translation, enacting the action of "carrying across" meaning. It would seem that translation of one sort or another is their medium and part of their very mes-

sage, for they perform in terms of slippage, fading, opening up and closing distances within the psyche.

We've all had childhoods but Rilke more so. The facts of his earliest years have been rehearsed often. It was a childhood in which he was neglected or alternately fantastically overinscribed by parental desires, as William H. Gass describes it:

> Rilke's parents had lost a daughter the year before they begot René (as he was christened); hoping for another daughter to replace her, and until he was ready to enter school, his mother, Phia, got him up girlishly, combed his curls, encouraged him to call his good self Sophie, and handled him like a china doll, cooing and cuddling him until such time as he was abruptly put away in a drawer. Later, with a mournful understanding that resembled Gertrude Stein's, Rilke realized that someone else had had to die in order to provide him with a place in life.
>
> (*Reading Rilke: Reflections on the Problems of Translation*)

Rilke's childhood was marked by parental allegiance to a dead child rather than to the actual child. Absence circling upon an absence. Add this to the inevitable sense of incomprehension bequeathed to any child and the result is estrangement many times over.

The final image of "Childhood," with its suggestion of Narcissus looking into the pool and gazing at his reflection, foretells anxieties: the child's sense that his small craft (the poem, the identity that he longs to perfect) must be compared to that of others and may be diminished in comparison. This is a jealous perception. From its first stanza the poem has betrayed anxiety over difference. Nevertheless, the child's apprehension of difference is part of his rescue, a rescue achieved through the intensity of his own perceptions, the rescue of the child from being solely the fantasy object of his parents' will. The child recognizes himself in part through the world's impact on his senses. He clings tightly to the self that he erects among the orbiting phenomena around him.

As the child-self dwindles in the poem's final images, we are left with the mystery and the sense of the unattainable. Child-

hood, because of the extreme difference between the child self and the adult self, serves as a template for later disappearances. The images Rilke creates are of animate loss, the child's toy sailing ship and his own shining face circling upon the psyche and dissolving from sight.

Rilke's poems are intimate in a disturbing way. We may wish to be passive, consuming his poems, but, as many readers have noted, the poems turn on us. We are being observed. A figure or object scrutinizes us, changing the compass points in the room while we read. The reader is implicated, not only by the startling challenge to change one's life of "Archaic Torso of Apollo" (with its most appropriated, most irresistible final line) but through the momentary testing encounters of even such brief poems as "Saint Sebastian," "People by Night," "The Orphan's Song" and "The Dwarf's Song." In its own terms, "Childhood" creates another sort of disturbing encounter as the poem shows us a missed encounter—our failure to meet or wholly contain that ghost child we were, the one who glides off, bearing the cargo of childhood's mysteries.

The final questions of "Childhood" are less plaintive than wondering, *"Wohin? Wohin?"* We might say that at some level this is the call of the abandoned child. More surely it is the call of the being who has metamorphosed into adulthood and who knows that not only his childhood face has disappeared but also a way of experiencing the world's largeness and strangeness has vanished. It is a cry, a repeated question, that resonates with awe more than with grief.

LEDA

When the god in his great need crossed inside,
he was shocked almost to find the swan so beautiful;
he slipped himself inside it all confused.
But his deceit bore him toward the deed

before he'd put that untried being's
feelings to the test. And the opened woman
saw at once who was coming in the swan
and understood: he asked *one* thing

which she, confused in her resistance,
no longer could hold back. The god came down
and necking through the ever weaker hand

released himself into the one he loved.
Then only — with what delight! — he felt his feathers
and grew truly swan within her womb.

translated by Edward Snow

Beckian Fritz Goldberg

SEXUAL HEALING: RILKE'S "LEDA"

Honey, I know you'll be there to relieve me
The love you give to me will free me
If you don't know the things you're dealing
I can tell you, darling, that it's Sexual Healing.
— Marvin Gaye/David Ritz/Odell Brown

Rilke's "Leda" appears in his volume of poems of concentrated "seeing," both scientific and mystical, but unlike those poems which contemplate a physical object — swan, panther, statue, even the personae of Adam and Eve via cathedral sculptures — there is no corresponding tangible image for this poem. There is only story, a myth related in various classical sources, of the Greek God Zeus taking the form of a swan and raping Leda, wife of King Tyndareus. As a result of this coupling and, according to some sources, a same-night union with her husband, Leda gives birth to two eggs which hatch two sets of twins: Pollux and Helen, Castor and Clytemnestra. In some versions it is Castor and Pollux in one egg, the girls in another. Helen is the beauty who reputedly sets off the Trojan War, and Clytemnestra later marries and murders King Agamemnon; thus Yeats' lines from "Leda and the Swan,"

A shudder in the loins engenders there
The broken wall, the burning roof and tower,
And Agamemnon dead.

While Yeats' poem takes the form of an annunciation, Rilke's re-seeing (re-vision) is not concerned with the historical consequences of the encounter though both poems, to a degree, concern sexual power.

This myth has become, in contemporary poetry, part of our cultural dialogue on gender and sexual power, from Mona Van Duyn's response to Yeats' "Did she . . ." in her Leda's opening, "Not for a moment . . ." to Adrienne Rich's rejoinder to Galway Kinnell's remarks in "Poetry, Personality and Death" on bestiali-

ty as trope, stating that it always seems to involve a male human with a female animal, as in Leda and the swan, largely because "women, at least in the imagination of men, are closer to nature."

Robert Bly comments that Rilke's "Leda" is all about "the sensuality of lovemaking," yet I think it is difficult for a contemporary woman to see the myth, in any of its versions, as romantically or as about "lovemaking" rather than power. It is sexual primarily in the Foucauldian sense of sex being "an especially dense transfer point for relations of power." The mystery is ultimately where that power resides and, for Rilke, its potentially transformative nature.

One of the remarkable features of Rilke's version of Leda is the role of the swan which, in other versions including classical versions, is merely a disguise for Zeus, a way for him to consort with the woman of his whims — a ruse he's used many times, sometimes taking the shape of an eagle, sometimes becoming a shower of gold, sometimes a Motown record producer. Rilke sees it as the Invisible taking visible form and in Rilke's poem it is not a disguise discarded — it is the "truly swan" that comes to matter, both literally and figuratively.

The poem begins with an element common to most versions of the myth — sexual helplessness, not only Leda's (Yeats' "her helpless breast" or Ovid's Leda "supinely pressed") but also the male god's initial need and bewilderment. It is need that first drives him, not simply a sexual need for Leda, but need to inhabit a physical body, to take on visible form, and animal form, for Rilke, is perhaps the purest. What happens is that the god vanishes or disappears (*verschwinden*) into the swan "all confused" (*verwirrt*). This is the first penetration in the poem and the god is confused in it, the identities of visible and invisible are confused; he is not in godlike control. He is "borne toward" the "deed" by the nature of the being he has entered. It is no longer, "You're my medicine open up and let me in," — more like, ". . . Baby ohh / Come take control, just grab hold / Of my body and mind. . . ."

But the sense of helplessness is mutual. In the third stanza Leda, because she has recognized "who was coming in the swan" is also "confused" (*verwirrt*) in her resistance. And this follows a

curious moment in the second stanza in which we are told that he (god/swan) "asked *one* thing" (Snow's italics). We know, of course, in the classical versions Zeus does not "ask." Rilke clearly intends to portray Leda's consent as she has understood the "one thing" he needs and cannot hold it back from him, not because he has overpowered her, but because it is something she by her very nature must bestow.

The implication is that, here, animal and woman possess what the male/divine do not and in the Rilkean cosmology means that men as "bees of the invisible" have the task of transforming the visible into "the invisible vibrations and excitations of our own nature which introduces new vibration-frequencies into the vibration-sphere of the Universe." Essentially the poem enacts this process.

Rilke's "seeing" poems involve a "gazing into" that hopes to be transformed into a "looking out from" — and this "looking out from" is a quality he associates with the animal world because

> the animal presumably is without all that accounting to itself and therefore has before itself and above itself that indescribably open freedom which perhaps has its extremely fleeting equivalent among us only in those first moments of love when one human sees his own vastness in another. (Quoted by Heidegger in *Poetry, Language and Thought*, 108)

It is a quality that Rilke, to some extent, also associates with children and with women "in whom life dwells more immediately, more fruitfully and confidently." The idea that true alienation is a primarily male experience is characteristic of the Romantic and the Modernist.

In order to ask this "one thing," then, the male god must enter into the animal *Umwelt*. "With all its eyes the creature world beholds / the open . . ." according to Rilke's Eighth Elegy, for the primary motive here is to look out on the Open as the animal does and in that vastness the earth is mirrored back into us, the invisible rises in us.

The poem is also a merging of the creative and procreative as Rilke saw that "artistic experience lies so incredibly close to that

of sex." Here, Leda reflects the traditional Romantic view of the female Muse who has the power to liberate the male poet's artistic heat and to inspire his artistic expression, though the female herself remains primarily "*Schoos*." The swan appears as a figure for the muteness of the poet, a role Larry Levis, in his essay "Some Notes on the Gazer Within," ascribed to the animal figure in many contemporary poems.

The animal disguise here is not mere ruse and, at the conclusion of the poem, no "indifferent beak" merely lets Leda drop. When the transformation and healing of the self is completed by the god-swan releasing "himself into the one he loved," he feels only then "his own feathers" — that is, becomes entirely what he is, like the animal, no longer a spectator to whom even his own being is an issue. He is "truly swan," the visible interiorized.

Ultimately, the poem functions as a cross dressing of the soul/self reflecting Rilke's interests in costume and disguise, the subject of some of his prose and certainly part of his own psychological formation as the boy René (who became Rainer), who was dressed as a girl by his mother in his early years and sometimes would dress himself as "Margaret" to please his mother after "Rainer" was naughty. It is not surprising then that gender is something Rilke attempts to strip away, having written that man is limited "when he loves as man *only* and not as a human being," and that women will someday cast off the "mutations of [their] outward status" and the "disguises" imposed on them by cultural definitions and social expectations or, as the song says, "Sexual Healing, baby . . . it's good for us."

THE BOWL OF ROSES

Angry ones: you saw them flare up, saw two boys
ball themselves into a something
that was all hatred, tumbling on the ground
like an animal attacked by bees;
actors, towering overstaters,
raging horses, crashing to collapse,
eyes rolling, baring their teeth
as if the skull was going to peel itself,
starting from the mouth.

But now you know how that's forgotten:
this full bowl of roses stands before you,
unforgettable, filled to the brim
with the utmost expression of being, bending,
yielding, unable to give, simply existing,
that could be ours: utmost for us too.

Silent life, opening and opening, no end in sight,
a use of space that takes no space away
from space that things around it need,
an existence with almost no outlines, all background
and pure inwardness, and much strange softness
and self-illuminated — right to the rim:
do we know anything, anywhere, that's like this?

Then like this: that emotion is born
from the touch of petal to petal?
And this: that a petal comes open like an eyelid
and underneath are just more eyelids, nothing else,
closed, as though they had to be asleep
ten times deeper to shut down visionary power.
And this above all: that through these petals
light somehow has to pass. From a thousand bright skies
they slowly filter each drop of darkness

within whose fiery luster the tangled group
of stamens stirs and rears erect.

And the movement in the roses — look:
gestures from such small angles of eruption
they'd never be noticed if not for the way
their rays fan out to the cosmos.

Look at that white one: it has opened in bliss
and stands there in its great splayed petals
like a Venus erect in her shell;
and the blushing one, that turns and leans
as if embarrassed, toward the one that's cool,
and how that cool one won't respond, withdraws,

and how a cold one stands, wrapped in itself,
among the opening ones, that shed everything.
And *what* they shed: how it is light or heavy,
how it can be a cloak, a load, a wing
and then a mask, now this, now that,
and *how* they shed it: as if before a lover.

Is there anything they can't become? Wasn't
that yellow one, lying there hollow and open,
the rind of a fruit where the very same color,
more concentrated, orangey-red, was juice?
And was unfurling just too much for this one,
because in the air its anonymous pink
has picked up a bitter aftertaste of violet?
And the one made of cambric, isn't it a dress
to which the soft and breath-warm slip still clings,
both of them tossed aside in morning shadows
near an old pool in the forest?
And this one, opalescent porcelain,
easily shattered, a shallow china cup
filled with small, lit butterflies, —
and that one, which holds nothing but itself.

Aren't all of us like that, containing just ourselves,
if self-containment means: transforming the outside world
and wind and rain and spring's great patience
and guilt and restlessness and masquerading fate
and the darkening of the earth at evening
and even the clouds that change and flow and vanish,
and even the vague command of the distant stars
all changed to a handful of inwardness.

It now lies carefree in these open roses.

translated by David Young

David Young

HANDFULS OF INTENSITY

For a long time, and particularly since the days of the Romantics, poets have borrowed favorite categories of subject matter from painters: the portrait, the landscape, the re-creation of moments from mythology and history, the genre scene. They might of course think of writing about myth or landscape without having visual treatments as models for their enterprise, but often those models helped them conceptualize both the subject and its treatment. We can all think of examples of poets' uses of these painterly categories, right on through the nineteenth century and into the twentieth.

The poet's gesture, invoking the pictorial, may be said to constitute an implicit challenge: knowing what we know about the power of visual images, can we find their equivalents through language? Can we perhaps even go beyond them? Is the imagination a place where whole museums can be created by the expressive power of words? Marvell, writing "The Picture of Little T. C. in a Prospect of Flowers," and Shelley, writing "Mont Blanc," are not proposing simply to do imitations of what landscape painters do; they are using such painters and paintings as a place from which to begin, a launching point.

But the still life? I can't find an example of a poet deliberately undertaking to create the verbal equivalent of a visual artist's still life before Rilke. Williams and Stevens would match him later, but Rilke seems to have a first, with "*Die Rosenschale*" and the hydrangea pair.[1] These poems deliberately match the kind of studies painters made of fruit and flowers and objects, *nature morte*, as the French term it. Theoretically, the still life ought to provide the same kind of launching point that portraits and landscapes can provide, but one can understand why poets might draw back from the idea: too much inertia to overcome, or an

[1] "*Blaue Hortensie*" and "*Rosa Hortensie*," in the first and second parts of the *Neue Gedichte*, respectively. He also did short studies of the rose interior, the opium poppy and the heliotrope.

idea so specific to the traditions of painting that it can never free itself from them. Fear of failure to launch, in other words.

Rilke, then, heady and daring, full of his experiences in Parisian galleries and museums, decides to try what no poet has tried before. And he's pleased enough with the result that he places it last in the great 1907 volume of the *Neue Gedichte*, the climax of a crescendo created by such longer pieces as "Tombs of the Hetaerae," "Orpheus. Eurydice. Hermes," "Alcestis," and "Birth of Venus." History moves toward myth in this sequence, then myth moves from narrative to the captured moment and gives way to the surprising power of the still life.

The influences are twofold: first a sculptor, then several painters. Rodin, whose secretary he served as for awhile, gave Rilke the injunction to study anything — panther, carousel, archaic torso, flamingo — until it yielded up its whole meaning and being. The chosen thing merged, in effect, with the artist's own sensibility, which was in turn dissolved — almost threateningly at times, Rilke discovered -— in its empathic union with the thing being scrutinized. Subjectivity, which was both the great strength and the great weakness of Symbolist art, is turned inside out at such moments. It reveals its power but it also abandons its own borders and sense of separate identity. Negative capability: ecstatic unions with unlikely or little noticed objects and creatures.

If Rodin had presented the theory, it was Cézanne who had revealed the practice, especially with respect to still lifes, along with other contemporaries like Van Gogh and Matisse. Rilke's letters on Cézanne show him absorbing the twin lessons of the artist's immense patience and his deliberate involvement with mundane or inconsequential subjects:

> . . . he uses his old drawings as models. And lays his apples on bed-covers which Madame Bremond will surely miss

> some day, and places a wine-bottle among them or whatever happens to be hand. And (like Van Gogh) he makes his "saints" out of such things; and forces them — *forces them* — to be beautiful, to stand for the whole world and all joy and all glory, and doesn't know whether he has succeeded in making them do it for him.
>
> (*Letters on Cézanne*, tr. Joel Agee, p. 40)

Cézanne's work ethic and risk-taking merge, for Rilke, with his arbitrary and unlikely subject matter, his contempt for grandeur. No wonder Rilke was tempted to try making still lifes of his own.

Add to these influences that of the gifted painter Paula Modersohn-Becker, the friend and rival (and sometime lover? We will never know) who was discovering modernism alongside Rilke, sometimes just a little ahead of him. She had begun to produce powerful, hieratic images, in the manner of Gauguin. Some were portraits and self-portraits; some were still lifes. Her recognitions pushed his, and his loss of her, with the accompanying guilt he felt at surviving, fortunate in his male privilege, was devastating, as "Requiem for a Friend" demonstrates. Paula painted with an abandon that Rilke wanted to match in his poems. She lost herself, as he acknowledged, in the integrity and completeness of her artistic commitment. He wanted no less than that for his own practice. Could he make a still life in which he could lose himself?

Many of the *Neue Gedichte* (the hydrangea pair included) are of course quite formal: quatrains, sonnets, and the like. The ones that eschew that connection to tradition are sometimes the ones that show the poet trying hardest to escape from the constraints of his art as he had practiced it earlier and his own self-control as he had hitherto understood it. It is as if there is no time for rhyme or traditional form in the gathering urgency of his response. Thus it is that such poems as "Requiem for a Friend," "Orpheus. Eurydice. Hermes" and this one, "The Bowl of Roses," stand out in this period of experimentation and productivity as particular landmarks of accomplishment, proleptic of both the style and the content of the *Duino Elegies*.

How does one match with language the intensity and experimentation with which the Fauves and Post-Impressionists painted? The answer lies in a new treatment of the figurative, of metaphor. Just as visual intensity, arresting in its unique rendering of what is seen, can be the hallmark of the risk-taking painter, so a boldness with metaphor, already sought by the Symbolists Rilke had emulated, would be the poetic equivalent. And as the new styles of painting foregrounded and explored the very nature of their own artistic medium — line, color, shape, paint itself, and the acknowledged and exploited fact of a three-dimensional world on a two-dimensional surface — so figuration, the basis of poetic thought, would need to re-examine and revalidate itself.

In well-known poems from the *Neue Gedichte* like "Spanish Dancer," Rilke had brilliantly refigured the figurative, giving it a new status and meaning. That poem begins by comparing the dancer to a kitchen match, flaring up when lit. It completes itself by having her stamp out the fire as she brings her dance to its close. The flame comparison has grown and metamorphosed throughout the poem. But the point of the fire trope is not just that it is sustained, but rather that fire and dance, along with other incidental comparisons — hands and arms to snakes, castanets like rattles — become part of some larger whole. The traditional relation of subject to figure is revised and we find ourselves in a place where such relations and such terms as metaphor and trope, with their implications of rhetorical ornamentation, don't suffice to characterize the experience we are having.

To put it another way, the poem is as much a poem about fire as it is a poem about a dancer. Any hierarchy that would put one above the other is a relic of an older way of thinking. Such categories have been surpassed. What Rilke partly means by the "new" in *New Poems* is that people haven't used language and thought process in this way previously, at least not so consistently and purposively. It's a different way of viewing the world and a different way of expressing that viewing. It will ultimately re-

define the human relation to the rest of existence, destroying political and religious hierarchies, and challenging anthropomorphism. And in "The Bowl of Roses" Rilke will break through to an expression of that new relation, prefiguring his own accomplishment in the *Duino Elegies*. Metaphoric relationships will now articulate an equality of being that will allow a "lowly" still life, a "mere" bowl of roses, to express everything that might need to be said about the human relation to the rest of existence. Treat metaphor radically enough, one might say, and it will reward you with a new physics and metaphysics!

Why flowers? Reopening the familiar avenue between the human and the floral evokes other poets, of course. So a bowl of roses poem is also about poetry, about a favorite trope. It's at once worn out and full of potential. Keats can help us see that. There's a stunning line in his "Ode to Psyche," when the speaker comes upon the lovers sleeping in the forest. In "deepest grass" under a "roof / Of leaves and blossoms," next to "A brooklet," they rest:

'Mid hush'd cool-rooted flowers, fragrant-eyed.

This line is a small triumph of musical language, but it is also an astonishing leap into synesthesia and imaginative dilation. Terms like "personification" and "anthropomorphism" feel clumsy as a means of describing what is happening here. The speaker is participating imaginatively in the very being of the flowers, touching his own sensibility directly to their existence. We either believe it or we don't. It's not a question of our believing whether flowers have eyes, whether eyes can be fragrant, or how flowers would be anything other than hushed, or know their roots are cool as opposed to warm. It's that our own tools of perception — hearing, touch, seeing, smell, even the sense of weight and gravity — interact with another mode of existence in a way that is instantly persuasive. That is the level of intensity and purpose,

achieved occasionally in Keats and other predecessors, which Rilke attempts with the roses. Reopening our relation to the beauty, ephemerality, openness, and rootedness of flowers invokes a poetic tradition while also engaging a painterly one.

Roses are chosen here because they particularly pose the problem of seeing a familiar thing in a fresh way. They have been too much written about, too regularly wrested round into symbols of love and beauty. By taking them on instead of, say, irises or anemones or peonies, the poet confronts the problem of the still life and the problem of the human-floral interaction in the most challenging fashion possible.

Rilke has an early poem, around 1896, a piece of generic romanticism really, that opens "Do you know that I am winding weary roses / in your hair which soft a sad wind stirs?" (*"Weisst du, dass ich dir müde Rosen flechte / ins Haar, das leis ein weher Wind bewegt —"*). So he is rewriting himself here, among other things, and he will continue to come back to the roses, in one of the finest of the *Sonnets to Orpheus* ("Rose, growing throne of yourself" [II–6]) and even in his own epitaph. The fact that roses have such a long history among humans, that they are so much the product of our cultivation and breeding, will help, in the long run, to strengthen and sustain the creation of that empathic magic we find in the line from Keats.

He begins with violence. The speaker addresses a "you" (*du*) who has just seen two boys fighting. Already the handling of figurative language is startling and extravagant. The comparisons feel as though they match the energy and confusion of the fight, pushing each other aside, building in intensity. But the strategy seems clear. We will turn toward the roses from a kind of bewildering opposite. The fact of human violence will be counterpoised to its possible alternatives, hidden in the bowl of roses, waiting for the speaker's meditative unpacking of them.

Why boys? Because they can mature. They still represent human potential, are still in the budding stage. They can of

course take their violence on into manhood, visiting it on their families, their enemies, themselves; but they still have also the potential to outgrow it, to find what the roses have to offer them instead.[2]

The poem now slows to a leisurely, meditative pace, relishing its subject. The second and third stanzas marvel at the collective meaning of the roses. They are "the utmost expression of being" and therefore an irresistible model both for the artist and for any living human. They partake of paradox — "a use of space that takes no space away / from space that things around it need" — and they seem inimitable: "do we know anything, anywhere, that's like this?" Thus they represent what we might be, but they also surpass that representation, leading us forward toward the ideal.

Now we begin to move into close-up, into detail. We learn that the touch of petal to petal is the birth of emotion. We find the petals likened to eyelids, and that leads toward an insight about their self-illumination: that it was born of the deepest possible sleep which, in turn, attracted and then distilled the light that dwells in them. But this light is now indistinguishable from darkness. Inside the rose, these two great opposites have become one. Sleeping is waking, darkness is light. So "utmost of being" is a place that takes no space and in which oppositions are resolved and united. How will that affect metaphor? It will mean that metaphor, which depends on the combination of likeness and difference, the world rhyming with itself, also points *beyond* itself, to the vanishing of difference.

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[2]William Gass misreads this opening in his very uneven study *Reading Rilke: Reflections on the Problems of Translation* (Knopf, 1999). He says of the fighting boys: "Bullyboys, actors, tellers of tall tales, runaway horses — fright, force, and falsification — losing composure, pretending, revealing pain and terror: these are compared to the bowl of roses" (4-5). But this is simply wrong. As the poem makes clear, the roses are a contrast, the *alternative* to the violence: "But now you know how that's forgotten: / this full bowl of roses stands before you." The roses are everything else. No wonder Gass finds the poem's opening "oddly violent and discordant" (5). He has missed its fundamental rhetorical strategy.

To reinforce this, Rilke devotes the next small stanza to a kind of microcosm/macrocosm effect: the smallest angles of eruption (another translator has "vibration") fan out to the cosmos, the whole universe. The implications of these simple flowers, rightly studied in their detail, are endless.

Now individual roses begin to emerge, in a riot of personification and figuration. They multiply their comparisons until the speaker must resort to listing: "a cloak, a wing / and then a mask, now this, now that." Two stanzas lead us to the longest stanza, which opens with the rhetorical question, "Is there anything they can't become?" and then revels in hues, tastes, eroticisms, porcelain, butterflies, and yet another paradox, the rose that holds nothing but itself, that is beyond metaphor, drawing away from the speaker's metamorphic excess.

We are that last rose, finally. In our sense of ourselves we resist comparisons and feel our uniqueness even as we sense what we have in common with all other beings.

These rich and beautiful stanzas, with their increasingly subtle readings of the possibilities of meaning and expression that the roses contain, feel like the heart of the poem, its main point. But in fact there is one more giant turn to take, one that will leave the roses and all the figurative ingenuity behind. It turns out that the visionary exactitude that has been applied to the bowl of roses is a gateway to a full understanding of what we mean and why we are here:

> Aren't all of us like that, containing just ourselves,
> if self-containment means: transforming the outside world
> and wind and rain and spring's great patience
> and guilt and restlessness and masquerading fate
> and the darkening of the earth at evening
> and even the clouds that change and flow and vanish,
> and even the vague command of the distant stars
> all changed to a handful of inwardness.

My "all of us" stretches the issue just a little: Rilke says simply "*alle*," which might be taken to mean "all the roses," or "everything." Edward Snow's version has "And aren't all that way: simply self-containing, / if self-containing means: to transform the world outside . . . into a handful of inwardness" (*New Poems [1907]*, p. 197). But I feel sure that Rilke means "all of us" and is here fully engaged with the question of what it means to be human, with the question he will take up at more length in the *Duino Elegies*, arriving at a similar answer.[3]

Rilke sees us not as cursed with consciousness and burdened by language, separated by these things from the world around us, as we so often feel is the case. Instead he suggests that self-consciousness and language define our uniqueness and constitute the purpose for our existence. We are here in order to transform the outer world into an inner world, creating in the process the same marriage of opposites, sleep and waking, light and dark, that is to be found in the interior of the roses. Language does not hamper us in this task; it is our indispensable means for transformation, which is why Rilke can propose, in the Ninth Elegy, that we may be "on this earth to say: / House / Bridge / Fountain / Jug / Gate / Fruit-tree / Window." And the world does not, he further informs us, resent this naming and transforming; it longs for it and welcomes it.

Of course this can all be seen as special pleading, the poet's rationalizing of his own activity, and it accounts for Rilke's sense of the priestly austerity of his vocation, an attitude some later poets have rather despised him for. But this is not elitist in the way that Symbolism was, or dismissive of non-artists as so much modernism was. And to call it narcissistic is laughable, since it springs the trap of subjectivity and escapes, moving into the world with visionary freedom.

Rilke's move here, as a poet, is in fact comparable to Heidegger's in philosophy, finally displacing Cartesian subjectivity

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[3]Snow seems to understand that as well. In his Introduction he calls this passage "one of the great moments of ontological redefinition in Rilke" (xii).

with the recognition that humans never act alone or experience alone, but participate, rather, in a restless, pluralistic existence that includes not only all their own social practices but the larger existence — earth and sky, mortality and divinity — that surrounds their history and culture, and always has. Recapturing something lost since Plato, poet and philosopher transform our sense of being and welcome us into a world newly configured and brimming with altered meanings.[4]

In this reconfigured understanding of human beings, poetic language becomes continuous with all language. It is not an elite or magical private discourse. What poets do is in fact what all of us do, spiritually, in our myriad interactions with the world, when we are most fully alive. We do it as children, learning the world and its names, and we do it as adults when we are truly grounded, aware of our surroundings and the value of our senses. Rilke's vision of our place in the world, so much like Heidegger's, is finally as democratic as that of William Carlos Williams, who stripped away some of the mythologizing the Germans indulged in and then let the same vision drive him and energize his poems.

It has recently become almost a reflex to begin any review or account of Rilke with a catalog of his numerous failings. It's perfectly fine to rail at his snobbishness and his personal shortcomings. We surely don't want to make him a saint. But it's important to recognize that the core of his vision, articulated here as he shows us that "It now lies carefree in these open roses," offers every human reader a way out of the curse of self-consciousness, the sense of separateness from the rest of existence, and the much-discussed frustrations that attend the relations of signifier to signified. Using a painter's mode and conventions, taking modernism's invitation to embrace excess, risking absurdity in his claims, he poses a question — *aren't all of us like that?* — that we ignore at our spiritual peril.

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[4]For a good account of Heidegger's crucial role in resolving the philosophical dilemmas associated with traditional metaphysics and traditional subjectivity, see James G. Edwards' *The Plain Sense of Things: The Fate of Religion in an Age of Normal Nihilism* (Penn State U. Press, 1997). See also David Abram's fine book, *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More Than Human World.*

ARCHAIC TORSO OF APOLLO

We've never known the legendary head
where the eye-apples ripened. But
his torso glows still, like a candelabrum
in which his gaze, turned down,

contains itself and shines. Otherwise
the breast-curve wouldn't blind you so, nor would
the hips and groin form toward that smile
whose center held the seeds of procreation.

And then this stone would stand here, short and broken,
under the shoulders' clear, cascading plunge
and wouldn't ripple like a wild beast's fur

and break with light from every surface
like a star: because there is no place
that doesn't see you. You must change your life.

translated by David Young

David Walker

THE SUBLIMINAL OBJECT

During several years of my childhood I had a recurrent experience of the uncanny. I would awake from deep sleep with an extraordinarily vivid impression of having held something in my hand. This impression was not in the form of memory as we usually think of it, but rather as what Stanislavsky in his instructions for actors called "sense-memory." I was unable to "remember" what I had been dreaming, nor could I identify the object I'd held by translating the experience into the rational categories of shape, weight, or texture. Rather, it was as though *my hand itself* remembered what it had held, by retaining its elemental imprint: the object itself had disappeared, but its trace remained as a distinctly palpable presence just beyond the reach of my waking mind. As the experience recurred, it began to feel familiar and comforting, but also hauntingly elusive, as I sought to pursue the ghostly essence before it slipped beneath the surface. I felt somehow that if I could only identify the object — which by this point had attained mythic proportions — something crucial would be revealed, but of course it never happened. Only much later did I realize that the experience was important to me precisely *because* of its elusiveness, enabling the thrill of inching my way beneath the radar of clarity and logic toward a realm of pure being.

My childhood experience resonates for me with the experience of reading Rilke in at least two different ways. Studies of the poet have quite rightly emphasized his importance in leading the transition from the ethereal and spiritualized world of the Symbolists to the more precise and hard-edged territory we identify as Modernism. Rilke's attention to the work of Rodin and Cézanne helped him understand that poetry could profitably focus on the stuff of ordinary life, that commonplace objects with all their flaws and inconsistencies could reveal as much or more than idealized essences. But objects in his work are never simply objects, any more than they are in the work of later poets like William Carlos Williams and Marianne Moore. The fact of Rilke's urgent attention, the intensity of his gaze, animates and concentrates the object's presence, so that a luminous and almost arche-

typal sense of significance emerges from it. Objects in his poetry are simultaneously palpable and ghostly, both there and not-there, essence and self-transcendence in one.

The other connection I draw between my childhood anecdote and Rilke's work is more general and perhaps more idiosyncratic. Often in reading a Rilke poem I experience it vividly, with an acute shock of recognition that makes it feel absolutely true — and yet I find it difficult to identify what its subject is, or even to say with any precision what I think the poem's "about." It is of course a truism that much modern poetry is only "about" itself, or about the experience of reading it, yet there is no poet of which this seems more true than Rilke. There's always much to *think* about in a Rilke poem: the sheer density of the language, the complexity of the imaginative design, invite and even require the use of rational faculties. And yet I often feel that Rilke's words are merely the means by which I approach the subliminal condition which they evoke; the essence of the poem is a pre-verbal and uncanny experience of which the text seems an echo, like an earthquake known only by its aftershocks, or a dream-object by its ghost-impression in the hand.

Both these qualities are exemplified in "Archaic Torso of Apollo," the opening sonnet in the 1908 second volume (of two) of Rilke's *Neue Gedichte*. It is one of his better-known short lyrics, thanks largely to its striking final sentence, which I suspect is rarely considered in the context of the whole poem. On one level the subject of the poem is quite straightforward: Rilke examines the ancient Greek statue named in the title. But it functions only nominally as description: the reader gets only a generalized sense of what the object actually looks like (hence scholars' inability to identify any particular statue as the subject). The poet has something much more visionary in mind: the radical disparity between the solidity and stillness of the object and the sense of fierce vitality which it evokes.

This disparity has partly to do, of course, with the inherent paradox of representing divinity in human form, but also with the current fragmentary condition of that representation. From the title and first line on, the statue's materiality is emphasized: a

lump of stone subject to the ravages of time, missing its head, limbs, and genitalia, it has been stripped down to its essential form, beyond particularity. Rilke begins by noting absence: the fact that the head is missing deprives us of witnessing the beauty of Apollo's face and the naturalness of his features, as evoked in the striking image of his eyes as ripening apples. But paradoxically, this very absence seems to infuse what remains with energy: the gaze which would otherwise be directed through the sun-god's eyes is turned down and concentrated (the metaphor is apparently that of a shade that contains and diffuses the light of a gaslamp, though "candelabrum" presumably also invokes the more ancient rituals of candlelight and sacred illumination), so that it emanates through the body itself, seeming to infuse the whole of the torso with life.

Rilke's grammar here is particularly interesting: the two long central sentences are framed in the subjunctive, calling attention again to the disparity between what might be and what is. If Apollo's gaze were not turned down and inward, if the statue weren't so infused with concealed energy, the breast-curve wouldn't be so "blinding," nor would the arc at the loins be so erotically compelling. Otherwise the fragmentary torso would be simply a "short and broken" bit of stone. Here also an important shift takes place: the "we" of the beginning of the poem ("We've never known") has become a "you" ("wouldn't blind you so"), as the statue's impact becomes more personal and immediate. This highlights a further turn of the poem's central paradox: while the statue's power is presented as though it emanated entirely from within, Rilke of course knows that what makes that power meaningful is the human intelligence that intuits it — in other words, the ability to respond empathetically to the power of art. Apollo was the sun-god, but he was also god of poetry and the imagination, and both these functions are central to the poem's vision. Distant as we are from classical idealism, the values of Apollonian culture are only available to us in broken form: the head and the "seeds of procreation" are missing. But rather than reacting with melancholy or nostalgia (as other early modernists like Hardy and Eliot were inclined to), Rilke suggests that if we fully

open ourselves to what remains, however ghostly or fragmentary, we can be fulfilled and completed by it.

And in the sestet, that process is enacted with blazing speed. The marble torso begins to pulse disconcertingly with energy: plunging in a clear cascade beneath the shoulders, rippling like a wild beast's fur (here the appeal seems as least as much dionysian as apollonian), exploding with light. In German this is all unpunctuated, heightening the sense of phantasmagoria as one clause leads inexorably to the next. Under the shared gaze of poet and reader, the solid object almost entirely transforms itself into palpable, kinetic life. And then, in a final, ravishingly abrupt movement, the gaze is turned back on us, on *you*. A colon and a "because" (*denn*) specify a logic that leaves us no way out; the vision of the animated torso presses inevitably to the conclusion that "there is no place / that doesn't see you." This is the point where asking "why" or "how" seems pointless, and explication irrelevant. The boy reaches for the object no longer there, and in the process discovers another realm of being. Opening yourself to the sacred mysteries of godhead or art — and for Rilke the two were never far apart — is exhilarating and often healing, but it also requires making yourself vulnerable to the world.

You must change your life.

REQUIEM FOR A FRIEND

I have some dead, and I have let them go
and been surprised to see them so good-natured,
making themselves at home in death, so easy,
so different from the reputation. Just you, you come
back; you graze me, haunt me, you try
bumping things that will shiver and ring,
to give you away. Oh, don't take from me what I've
slowly learned! I'm right; you're wrong
if you think you need to feel homesick
for anything that's here. We change these things,
transfigure them; the world isn't here, we mirror it
into our own existence as soon as we perceive it.

I thought you'd made more progress. I'm dismayed
that *you* would get confused, come back, who did
more transfiguring than any other woman.
That we were terrified by your death — no, that
your hard death interrupted us, darkly,
tearing the time beforehand from the aftermath:
that's our concern; putting that back together
will be our job. But that
you too were terrified, that you're even having
some terror now, there where terror has no meaning;
that you'd give up any piece of your eternity
and come back here, my dear friend, here,
where everything's still not come to life;
or that out there, where everything's infinite, overwhelmed
and inattentive in your first encounter,
you somehow didn't grasp the greatness of it all
the way you grasped each single thing on earth;
that from the orbit you'd already entered
the mute force of some old upset
should drag you back into our counted time —:
this often wakes me up at night
like a burglar, breaking in.

If I could say you've only come
peacefully, out of kindness, generous abundance,
because you are so sure, so self-possessed,
that you can scoot around anywhere, like a child,
with no fear of places where anyone can do
bad things to you — but no: you're *asking* something.
That goes right down into my bones, cuts like a saw.
An accusation, as if carried by your ghost,
pursuing me when I withdraw at night
into my lungs, into my bowels,
into the last poor chamber of my heart, —
that wouldn't be as bad as this dim *asking*.
What is it that you want?

Tell me, am I supposed to travel?
Did you leave behind some object that is suffering,
something that wants to come after you?
Must I go visit some country
you never saw, though it was as close
as the other side of your senses?

I want to travel its rivers, go ashore,
ask about its oldest customs,
stand talking with its women in their doorways
and watch as they call their children home.

I want to notice how they wear
the landscape there, doing the old work
of fields and meadows; to hanker after
being led before their king;
want to charm their priests with bribes
to lay me down before their most important idol
and lock the temple doors . . .

Then when I've learned a lot,
I'll simply watch the animals, till something
in the way they turn and move

enters my own limbs and joints;
I want to have a brief existence in their eyes
that take me up and gently let me go,
relaxed, making no judgments.
I'll have the gardeners name the many flowers for me
so I can bring back proper names in pots,
beautiful remnants of a hundred or more odors.
And I'll buy fruits, fruits that contain
that country still, even its skies!

Because that's what you understood: full fruits.
You used to set them out in bowls before you
and weigh their heaviness with colors.
And you saw those women too as fruits
and the children, just as though from inside out,
expanding into the shapes of their existence.
And finally you saw yourself as fruit,
took yourself out of your clothes; carried
yourself to the mirror, let yourself into it
right up to your gaze, kept the gaze large before it,
and did not say: that's me; no: this *is*.
And so incurious was your gaze at last,
so unacquisitive, so truly vowed to poverty,
it didn't even need you any more: holy.
That's how I want to recall you, the way
you presented yourself, deep inside the mirror,
far from everything else. Why come any other way?
Why deny yourself? Why would you have me think
that in the amber beads you wore around your neck
there was still something heavy, that heaviness
that never exists in the serene beyond of paintings?
Why seem to show me some evil omen by the way you stand?
What makes you lay out the contours of your body
like the lines inside a hand, making me see them
only as some outline of your fate?

Come into the candlelight. I'm not afraid

to look the dead in the face. When they return
they have a right to stand there in our gaze
the same as other things.
Come here; and we'll be quiet for a bit.

Look at this rose on my desk:
isn't the light around it just as timid
as the light on you? It shouldn't be here either.
It should have bloomed or withered out there in the garden,
without involving me, — now it goes on like this,
and what is my awareness to it?

Don't be afraid if I begin to grasp it now:
oh, it's rising up in me, I have to
grasp its meaning, I'd have no choice,
even if it killed me. I do see why you're here,
I understand exactly. The way
a blind man grasps a nearby object, feeling it all over,
I feel your fate, and know no name for it.

Let us grieve together, that someone
took you right out of your mirror. Can you still cry?
You can't. You turned
the strength and pressure of your tears
into your ripe gazing, and you were changing
all of the juices inside you
into a strong existence that would rise
and circulate, unseeing and in equilibrium.
Then chance stepped in and took you, your last chance,
back from your farthest progress, into a world where juices
insist on having things their way.

Not all at once. It didn't tear you fully;
at first it only tore a piece. But then
around this piece, day after day,
reality gathered, making it heavy,
until it took all your attention;

you had to go to it and break in pieces
according to the law, yourself, with effort,
spending your entire self.
And from the night-warm soil of your heart
you grubbed the seeds up, seeds still green,
from which your death would sprout: yours,
your own death to your own life.
And then you ate them, your death-seeds,
as you would any others, ate the seeds
and found an aftertaste of sweetness
you hadn't intended, sweetness on your lips,
you: already so sweet within your senses.

Oh let us grieve. Do you know,
when you called your own blood back
from its incomparable orbit, how unwillingly,
how hesitantly, it returned?
How it resumed life's narrow little cycles,
all confused. How mistrustfully
it entered the placenta, suddenly
all tired out from the long way home?
You drove it on, you pushed it, dragged it
up to the hearth, the way you'd drag
a group of animals towards sacrifice;
and wanted it, despite all, to be happy.
And finally you succeeded: it *was* happy,
and it came forward and gave up. And you thought,
because you had grown used to other measurements,
that this would only be a little while;
but you were back in normal time now,
and normal time is long. And time goes on,
and time expands, and time is like a relapse
into an illness.

How short your life was if you compare it
to those hours when you sat there, bending
the lush forces of your own lush future

down toward the child-seed within you
that was becoming fate. Oh heavy work,
work that surpassed your strength. You did it,
day after day, dragging yourself forward
to pull the lovely weaving from the loom
and use the threads all differently.
And finally you had heart enough to celebrate.

Then, because it was over, you wanted a reward,
just like children when they've had to drink
some bittersweet tea to make them better.
This is the way you rewarded yourself:
because you were too far apart from everyone,
as you still are; nobody could have guessed
what the right treat for you would be.
You knew it. You sat up
in that same bed you'd given birth in
and a mirror stood before you, one that gave
everything right back to you. Now everything was you,
and right up front, and anything deeper was just deception,
the lovely deception of any woman who likes
to put jewelry on and combs her hair and changes.

And then you died as women used to die
in the old days, died in the warm house,
died the old-fashioned death of women lying in,
women who are trying to close themselves
back up again but can't, because the darkness
to which they've also given birth
comes back, pushes its way in, and enters.
Oh shouldn't they have found
some wailing women for you? Women you can pay
to howl the whole night through, when it's too quiet?
Rituals, please! We no longer have enough
rituals. They've all been talked away.
That's why you've had to come back, dead,
and here, with me, review some grieving.

Can you hear me grieving? I'd like to fling my voice
out like a cloth across the remnants of your death
and shred it to pieces until everything I say
goes dressed in rags from that torn voice, goes freezing.
If mourning were enough. But now I must accuse:
not the man who took you from yourself
(I'll never trace him, he's like all of us),
and, still, I accuse in him: the man.

If somewhere deep within me rises up
a sense of having been a child I still don't know,
maybe the very purest essence of my childhood:
I don't want to know it. Without even looking,
I'll make an angel from it and then hurl it
into the front rank of crying angels, angels who remember God.

Because this suffering's gone on too long,
no one can stand it, it's too heavy for us,
this crazy sorrow caused by phony love
that builds on its traditions like a habit,
and calls itself a right, luxuriant from injustice.
Where is one man who has the right of ownership?
Who can possess what cannot hold itself
but just from time to time can catch itself
and, blissful, throw itself again, the way
a child throws a ball? As little as the general can possess
the carved Nike on his vessel's prow
when the mysterious lightness of her godhead
suddenly lifts her into the bright sea wind:
that's how little one can call a woman back
who, seeing us no longer, goes on forward
along some narrow strip of her existence,
miraculously, without a misstep:
unless of course he has a bent for guilt.

For *this* is guilt, if anything is guilt:
not to enlarge the freedom of a love

with all the freedom we would wish ourselves.
We need, where we love, just this:
to let each other go; for holding on
is something we do naturally, it takes no practice.

Are you still there? What corner are you standing in?
You knew so much about all this
and got so much accomplished, going along
open to all things, like a breaking day.
Women suffer: to love is to be alone,
and artists realize sometimes, in their work,
that they must keep transforming, where they love.
You began both; and both exist in what
your fame, detaching them from you,
begins to disfigure now.
Oh, you were well beyond any fame. You were
unobtrusive; you had softly, quietly,
taken your beauty,
the way one takes a flag down
on the gray morning of a working-day,
and wanted nothing but a good long spell of work
that's left unfinished: in spite of everything, not finished.

If you're still there, if in this darkness
there's still a place in which your spirit
quivers and floats on the shallow sound-waves
of one single voice, raised alone at night
in the air that moves in a high-ceilinged room:
hear me; help me. You see, we slide back
not knowing that we're doing it,
back from our own achievement
into ways we don't intend or want, in which
we're trapped, as in a dream,
and where we die, unable to wake up.
No one goes farther. Anyone who has lifted
his blood up high in a long spell of work
can have this happen, he can't keep carrying it

and it falls back from its own weight, worthless.
For somewhere there's an ancient hatred
between our normal life and the great work.
That I may see into it, and say it: help me.

Don't come back. If you can stand it,
stay dead with the dead. The dead are busy.
But help me in a way that doesn't harm you,
the way what's distant sometimes helps the most: inside me.

translated by David Young

Carol Muske

RETRIEVING THE LAMENT: RED SHADOWS, RED ECHOES BETWEEN "REQUIEM FOR A FRIEND" AND "SELF-PORTRAIT, 1906"

(All quoted poem excerpts are from The Selected Poetry of Rainer Maria Rilke, *edited and translated by Stephen Mitchell)*

As if there exists a kind of "Etiquette for Ghosts," Rainer Maria Rilke begins his strange, beautiful and confounding poem "Requiem for a Friend" with a plea to the spirit of this deceased friend to stop "haunting" him in unconventional ways. His other "dead" are no trouble, he says:

> I have my dead, and I have let them go
> and was amazed to see them so contented,
> so soon at home in being dead, so cheerful.

These cooperative dead know the limits of their acceptability. But the eponymous friend — the dead woman, Paula Modersohn-Becker — refuses to be polite, even seems deliberately clumsy, crashing into things and unnerving poor Rilke:

> Only you
> return, brush past, loiter, try to knock
> against something ...

What is there about the memory of this lost woman that so unsettles Rilke? There is guilt, sorrow, but mostly an astonished, agitated, involuntary remembering, like a reflex, a tic of recall that he cannot control:

> I thought you were much further on. It troubles me
> that you should stray back . . .

I recognize this agitation. I have not been able to stop thinking about this unearthly but oddly grounded poem for years — ever since I first read it. Years ago I found reference to Modersohn-Becker in

footnotes, biographies — I found Adrienne Rich's forceful poem on the subject of this woman and her friend and fellow artist, Clara Westhoff. (Rich's poem, in *The Dream of a Common Language*, speaks in Modersohn-Becker's voice, addressing Westhoff.)

Paula Modersohn-Becker was a love interest of Rilke's at the artists' colony, Worpswede, around 1900. Clara Westhoff, whom Rilke later married, was also a love interest there — and all three were friends. At the time, however, it does not seem that Rilke took either woman artist seriously, apart from that "love interest." (His monograph on Worpswede, published in 1903, does not mention either woman — and his letter of introduction, written much later to Rodin on Modersohn-Becker's behalf, described her as "the wife of a very well-known German painter.") Rilke married Clara Westhoff and Paula Becker married Otto Modersohn, the "well-known German painter" (who was in fact a competent, somewhat known painter) against her better judgment. Rilke had a child with Westhoff and after a while, he left her and the child. Clara handed the child over to relatives and went back to her old life. Paula Becker had a daughter by Modersohn and died just after giving birth in 1907. Perhaps because of their sense of the transience of human relationships, and their own inability to "stay," the three managed somehow to remain oddly connected, meeting in Paris after their youthful artist days.

Rilke's subject in "Requiem for a Friend" is the "woman artist" — that tortured being whom he knew first-hand — watching as she struggled to reconcile two powerful opposing forces, motherhood and artistic passion. Despite his own ambivalence and guilt, he understood this battle in an intuitive way — perhaps better than any other man — or rather, any other man who is a poet.[1]

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[1]Nevertheless, Rilke rather shamefully played down his connection to PMB in "public" statements, even after writing "Requiem for a Friend" in 1908. Perhaps out of deference to Otto Modersohn, he does not "name" Paula in his poem — as he names, prominently, other dedications — but he goes on to refuse the Becker family request that he comment on her journals — and late in life, in an interview, he denies that he ever knew her work well.

I open a book by Gillian Perry, entitled *Paula Modersohn-Becker, Her Life and Work*, a study of the artist's work, with color plates of her paintings and reproductions of some of her drawings, as well as excerpts from her letters and journals. A portrait of Rilke, painted in 1906, in Paris, presents itself. Unlike Clara Westhoff's carefully-rendered, Rodinesque, highly realistic bronze sculpture of Rilke's head, Modersohn-Becker's portrait of the poet is jarring. It is pale, yet punctuated — flat, strange. William Gass, in his recent *Reading Rilke*, says it is "unfinished," just as Rilke's own view of his poems:

> From Worpswede calls came which were not satisfactorily answered, so Otto Modersohn, the husband who was supporting his wife in her separation from him, arrives to implore her to return. Paula's refusal to leave Paris, her insistence on divorce, frightened Rilke, who stopped sitting for his portrait and ducked — as if guilty of some indiscretion — out of sight. The painting remains as unfinished as his self-portrait poem suggests his great work was. Nevertheless, it is boldly signed PMB.

Gillian Perry disagrees on the matter of the portrait's supposed "unfinished" state:

> The painting of Rilke, with its emphasis on the two dimensional canvas and simplified features, marks an important development in Modersohn-Becker's portrait style.

I would side with Perry here — because of the bold signature, yes — but also because one has only to look at a couple other portraits of Modersohn-Becker's of the period (including a self-portrait) to see that this "unfinished" air was deliberate. And something more. Something "haunted" each of these portraits, a kind of stylistic comment. PMB chose to encircle Rilke's eyes, nose, lips and shoulders with red "outlines" — giving him a ravaged yet hyper-animated look, a sort of bloodshot body halo, infra-red body lipstick. Gass says that these red outlines are Modersohn-Becker's specialty — but they are not — or not entirely. She seemed to have picked up this technique from studying Van

Gogh — in particular, his "Camille Roulin" of 1888. Because she was a serious, surprising artist, she was making a great master's experiment her own — because this odd "red shadowing" expressed exactly what she wished to express about her subjects, most especially Rilke.

Few critics of Rilke, or of "Requiem for a Friend," have looked at PMB's paintings. She was, it is true, occasionally derivative, but her perspective is always thoughtful, engaging, and often completely original. Some of her work is deeply moving. She was given to "commentary" on her subjects — these "remarks" later symbolized by the red lines. Motherhood is a theme, but her mothers and children are not sweet like Mary Cassat's — they are fiercer, earthier, poor, but at home in their bodies. (PMB was inspired by women in her work, though she was never part of the turn-of-the-century Women's Movement. She saw her struggle as an artist as solo and personal — though she mourned the lost chances of women artists in her journal, including her own. When she died suddenly while holding her newborn daughter in her arms, on her first day "up" after the birth, she cried out the German word "*Schade*" — "Shame" or "What a shame.")

In 1906, when Rilke sat for the "outlined" portrait, he was also writing his own "Self-Portrait, 1906." Things were calmer now among the three friends. The old "love interests" had ebbed and surged. Modersohn-Becker had declared, in her journal, her "preference" for Clara over Rilke. In a formal letter to Westhoff written as early as 1901, she stated her disapproval of Rilke's casual wielding of male privilege — and Westhoff's acquiescence. "From your words, Rilke speaks too passionately," she said. She chastised her friend for giving up her identity:

> I know little about you two, but it seems to me that you have shed much of your old self in order to lay it at the feet of your king, like a cloak for him to walk over. For yourself, for the world, for art, and for me as well, I would like you to wear your gilded mantle again.

By 1906, Westhoff had perhaps regained her mantle. Certainly, Rilke seemed no longer her "king"; passion had cooled — but

some intensity still clung to all three when they met. Rilke and Modersohn-Becker, in Paris, spent long days together.

Gass' offhand linking of PMB's portrait of Rilke with his self-portrait poem is provocative. Extending that link — by which I mean reading the poem as one looks at the portrait — is illuminating. It is possible to imagine that the 1906 portrait was a deliberate visual representation of the "Self Portrait, 1906" poem.

> The stamina of an old, long-noble race
> in the eyebrows' heavy arches. In the mild
> blue eyes, the solemn anguish of a child
> and, here and there, humility — not a fool's,
> but feminine: the look of one who serves.
> The mouth quite ordinary, large and straight,
> composed, yet not unwilling to speak out
> when necessary. The forehead still naïve,
> most comfortable in shadows, looking down.

I believe (though I have no proof — other than the portrait's own arched brows and "naive" forehead and straight mouth, seriously exaggerated, both washed out and heightened by the artist's irony) that Modersohn-Becker was "painting" Rilke's poem: in effect, a mirror of his own self-portrait. I think the two friends had come to that intimate (yet distanced) a dual perspective. She saw and painted about him what he saw and wrote about himself, though "interpreted" by her. Unlike Cézanne's canvasses (which they both admired) which "revealed the inner character of the subject" through luminous surfaces, Modersohn-Becker "recorded" the subject in two-dimensional flatness and outlined the salient features, "mantled" in introspection — how she "saw" Rilke's self.

> This, as a whole, just hazily foreseen —
> never, in any joy or suffering,
> collected for a firm accomplishment;
> and yet, as though, from far off, with scattered Things,
> a serious, true work were being planned.
>
> "Self-Portrait, 1906" (*tr. Stephen Mitchell*)

PMB's red re-iteration signaled what was "hazily foreseen," outlining the "scattered things." In effect, she painted the second stanza of the poem *over* the first. He is "collected" only in the hazy red outlines — in fact, the portrait looks as if the features Rilke described in the first part of his self-portrait poem, have been *emptied*; his eyes and mouth gape, as if waiting to be filled.

Just so, Rilke "answers" her visual questions in "Requiem for a Friend." I have read this poem for years as another Rilkean "Eurydice Returned" meditation — or as an extraordinary manifesto of grief and empathy for women — a glittering indictment of male possessiveness and power, a didactic lyric, pure Rilke.

But for the first time, I find myself reading the poem as Rilke's total identification, his admission of another Self wholly into the poem, not as "Other" but as "*Ich.*" He is mirroring and absorbing (as Modersohn-Becker mirrored him); he is painting her self-portraits. And this is the "retrieval" of the "lament."

> That's what you had to come for: to retrieve
> the lament that we omitted.

Paula Modersohn-Becker appears in the poem stepping out from "deep inside the mirror," from the false mirror of his regard, in which he has "cherished" her — now she steps out (or he pulls her out, as he says), reminding him of his debt to her.

At first, he interrogates her presence, imagines her "homesick" for "anything in this dimension" — protesting her return to (and out of) "reflection" — his play on words — for these reflections are but "Things," humanly transformed, and not "real," he says, going straight for the painterly image of "the polished surface of our being."

Because he claims to have no understanding of why she has returned, he is aghast at her mute pleading. She has not come out of "kindness" or "abundance" (a familiar "country" of feminine surplus) — thus he must "travel" to find out why she silently pleads.

Where does he travel? He travels into and within her paint-

ings, her self-portraits. His list of "destinations" are the exact subjects of her paintings: women, mothers, children, workers in fields and meadows, animals, "small clay pots" — and at last, "fruits."

And here, Rilke strikes red-gold:

> For that is what you understood: ripe fruits.

Then:

> And, at last, you saw yourself a fruit, you stepped
> out of your clothes and brought your naked body
> before the mirror, you let yourself inside
> down to your gaze; which stayed in front, immense,
> and didn't say: I am that; no: this is.

Thus she was not "doubled," as in painting — she existed within the mirror. But here is the crucial point — she did not see *herself* in the mirror, she saw (and this gaze remained "in front") the "*this is*," the subsumption of the ego into Existence. This retreat of the dead artist into the mirror had satisfied Rilke aesthetically; he had admired her in memory, in the glass of his regard. (In fact, he admired this self-obliteration as the essence of art.)

But something with weight — the "heaviness" of her amber beads (a necklace she wears in a self-portrait, echoing red-gold) is the touchstone that allows her to materialize in this world again. And again, there are hints of the "blood" lines drawn around and about things:

> What makes you read the contours of your body
> like lines engraved inside a palm ...

And the blood-imagery recurs:

> Ah, let us lament. Do you know how hesitantly
> how reluctantly your blood, when you called it back,

returned from an incomparable circuit?
how hesitantly, it returned?

Here Rilke is imitating her "red-shadowing" — he is painting her, as she painted herself. Here he launches himself on her "incomparable circuit" — *into death then back*. Then he goes so far below the surface, into her body, that he follows the blood from her heart throughout her circulatory system — and draws the red lines' uncharted progress — into the placenta, into the mother's blood as it changes into the blood/food of the fetus.

And in this weird protraction of the painter's gaze, he actually does what he means to do when he says he will "travel" for her: he becomes her, even as she gives herself up in the process of reproduction. He understands now that motherhood is death — not only literally, in her case, but figuratively, to the woman artist. In this shocking identification, his horror and anger take the form of rather showy condemnation of the entire male sex, who live beyond this blood-split, who live with no red shadow within.

Paula Modersohn-Becker has not painted this last portrait of her motherhood/death — Rilke seeks to accomplish it for her — because she has died in "the lovely deception of any woman," pretending that her feminine lot — combing her hair, trying on jewelry, dying in childbed — is acceptable.

Now he confronts the lie in the mirror and understands at last what it means to "retrieve the lament." She has not grieved for herself, he has not grieved for her motherhood. The poem leaves him there, trying to paint, face to face with her in the mirror — confirming the lie — trying to re-draw it. (Remember, she does not say "I am that" to her reflection in the mirror, she says, as a mother, as nature, "this is.")

Rilke calls out for help and hopes that the "soundwaves" of his voice will locate where her spirit "resonates." But:

Anyone who has lifted
his blood into a years-long work may find

that he can't sustain it, the force of gravity
is irresistible, and it falls back worthless.

The blood falls back, back from "work" back from the years of our dying, the work of art, of traveling the incomparable circuit, of identification and gestation.

For somewhere there is an ancient enmity
between our daily life and the great work.

He claims this loss for all artists, men and women.

There is PMB's own "Self-Portrait with Hand on Chin" — also painted in 1906, the year of the Rilke portrait — and finished in 1907, just before her death. In the portrait, her features are outlined like Rilke's — red-stained — eyes, lips, nose, neckline and between her fingers. In this self-portrait, her eyes look haunted, startled — and the fingers are lifted to the chin in a gesture of hesitation, nearly a silent warning. There is something so enormously still and yet exaggerated about the expression that I can't help but imagine that this is the image of Paula that Rilke saw before him. The "infra-red" line just at her scalp, as if just under the surface the blood is on fire — is terrifying.

And the "lament" is ongoing. Though he asks her to return to the dead "if she can bear to," he also asks that she continue to return his gaze within the mirror of painting and writing, within himself.

He has failed her. But he has also tried harder (he might say) than any other man, to have retrieved the irrevocable lament. In the end, he continues to call after her, abject, like a child calling (most terribly, after all he's seen!) for its perfect mother.

But help me, if you can without distraction,
as what is farthest sometimes helps: in me.

But Rilke may be saying with that final "in me" that she has entered him now — that he is pregnant with her — and that her in-

ternalized presence, though actually dead and "farthest away," can assist his vision ("... *hilft: in mir*"). His own great lie in the poem about "letting go" ("We need, where we love, to practice only this: / letting each other go. For holding on / comes naturally; we do not need to learn it") is obviated by the profound lesson he learns before our eyes in this transubstantiative "Requiem." This poem, it seems to me, is about nothing if not holding on.

Eric Torgersen

YOU MUST CHANGE YOUR ART

Can "Requiem for a Friend" have displaced even the *Sonnets to Orpheus* and *Duino Elegies* at the core of our American obsession with Rilke? It is very prominent in Robert Hass's introduction to Stephen Mitchell's first volume of Rilke translations — the success of his entire series being somehow an index of the scope of the Rilke boom itself — and it is equally prominent in two recent books: Galway Kinnell and Hannah Liebmann's *The Essential Rilke* and William H. Gass's *Reading Rilke.* Adrienne Rich, in "Paula Becker to Clara Westhoff," has written a kind of — ill-informed and mistaken — refutation, and Tom Clark a parody that begins, "Stay dead, Paula."

If I am right, we must have seized on the poem because it is such an anomaly: In it Rilke sounds so much more contemporary, so much more like us than he does in any other major poem. Who can imagine writing anything like the Sonnets or Elegies? They astound us in part by their otherness, by being so compelling after arriving from so far off, from a world in which the poet, enjoying the hospitality of a princess at her castle by the sea, hears a voice speaking to him from out of a storm. In the Requiem Rilke writes the first person in a highly personal way, using all his rhetorical skills to persuade us — as a measure of the poem's sincerity — that he speaks in his own voice about his own life, his own feelings and convictions, to an actual woman, Paula Modersohn-Becker, about whom, or whose fate, he cares deeply. As familiar as this sounds to us, it is anything but Rilke's ordinary procedure. He believed, and affirms in the poem his belief, that art is impersonal, far beyond self and desire, on the other side of the mirror, ineffably present but unreachable. But he has somehow — and I will be asking how — been caused here to write a poem in a voice so assertively personal that, despite our academic training and awareness of theoretical difficulties, we no more think of it as that of "the speaker" than we do the voice of, say, "Kaddish" or the most autobiographical poems in *Life Studies.*

In case anyone does not remember, the poem imagines that the painter Paula Modersohn-Becker, dead a year ago after child-

birth, has returned to Rilke in the night with some mute plea, which he tries desperately to decipher so that he may fulfill it. He persuades us skillfully that Modersohn-Becker's fate is desperately compelling and significant for him, her return chilling and terrifying, and he praises her art in the highest possible terms. But at the same time he tells her with conviction that she is wrong to come back, and was terribly, fatefully wrong, after leaving her husband Otto Modersohn in order (as Rilke saw it) to achieve the greatest possible progress in her work, to allow herself to be drawn back to him and to bear his child. "I am right and you are wrong," he says, ostensibly only about the issue of whether she could be right to come back after death, and then proceeds to lay out, as defenses, with an urgency that makes clear that he feels under assault and profoundly endangered, his most treasured principles. For the artist, the demands of art and those of life are irreconcilable, and the artist must choose those of art; for the woman artist, designed for giving literal physical birth, this is particularly cruelly so; art is impersonal, and art-objects are of a perfect otherness; it is possible and desirable to die the one individual death that flows from one's individual life, for which that life has prepared one; the outer world of objects and actions has lost its primacy to the inner world of the human soul and heart; love is not holding but letting go, not togetherness or possession but mutually supported solitude and the granting of freedom; men are incapable of it.

We should not fail to notice, then, that despite the highly personal voice, the chillingly dramatic ghost-story *mise en scène*, a large part of the poem's content, however passionately expounded, is pure doctrine, conceived before the poem was written and expressed elsewhere both before and after its writing.

I have written a book about the relations, in life, between Rilke and Modersohn-Becker, and about the continuities and disjunctions between their actual life stories and the content of the poem. It should probably be no surprise that the more one knows about the two central figures in the poem, the harder it is to accept it at face value. From this perspective, what Rilke says in the

poem is self-serving, defensive, and shot through with ulterior motive. It does the historical Paula Modersohn-Becker no justice at all; it would have appalled and infuriated her. She would have known how to answer, as she had always known how to answer him in life, but Rilke made his definitive statement at a time when he could be sure of having the last word.

In a few idyllic weeks after they first met in Worpswede, Rilke was very taken with Paula Becker, probably in love with her; once he learned that she was secretly engaged to Otto Modersohn, their relations would never again be untroubled. From the time that Rilke married her best friend, Clara Westhoff, suddenly and more or less on the rebound, they were chiefly antagonists; she deplored, for one thing, his effect on and treatment of Clara. Rilke thought his former rival Modersohn unworthy of Paula; both he and Clara conspired actively with Paula when she left him early in 1906, intending to end the marriage and live and paint on her own in Paris. Rilke felt guilty toward her in the last year of her life because, after encouraging her to take the step, and at first doing a great deal to help and support her, he had pulled away from her at critical moments shortly before she decided — tragically, as he saw it — to reconcile with her husband. Behind this guilt lay that of having paid little attention to her art in their first five years of their acquaintance; he was very late in discovering that she was the fine painter honored in the poem. In letters written to her near the end of her life, he acknowledged and apologized for both of these failures.

But the crux of the struggle between them was their disagreement over the conflicting claims of life and art, which is also the crux of the Requiem. Rilke drew from Rodin and then Cézanne the lesson that great artists owed everything to art and nothing to life, and used it to justify his human failures, especially in relation to his wife and daughter. Paula, who had the highest aspirations for her art, wanted an actual, committed marriage and children, too. Rilke believed passionately that her death proved him right; one of the least attractive things about the Requiem on the human level is the way it says I told you so.

In her essay "American Narcissism" (*Threepenny Review*, Winter 1998), Louise Glück makes her own related case against the Requiem:

> No matter whose English version I read, I cannot rid myself of the impression, in "Requiem," that this is neither a meditation on a specific human life nor a poem of mourning: I keep thinking it suits Rilke exactly that Paula Becker died; dead she is his creature, a mirror of, or adjunct of, the self.

Paula, she says, "the living other," is "erased in being memorialized."

> When the poet says, in Stephen Mitchell's translation, "if you are still here with me," I cannot help but feel that Paula Becker is far more eagerly admitted into the poet's soul dead than she would have been alive: alive she was volatile, unreliable, separate in her will. Nor am I persuaded by "in this one man I accuse: all men," by the ready identification of the poet with the woman now conveniently absent. It is too easy to identify with what cannot, in behavior, repudiate identification.

In Glück's terms, we see the closed circuit of narcissism: the other is not admitted, only a reflection of the poet's self, whose loss he contemplates in raptly elegiac tones. (Her argument is more subtle in its details than can be done justice here.) Her case against the poem is part of a larger case against what she sees as narcissism in recent American poetry; Rilke's influence, particularly in longer poems, and especially the Requiem, is identified as a central source. Rilke, Glück says, is a dangerous influence, and I think that she is right in this, too. As he calls us to take our art with the utmost seriousness, he has a way of going to our heads, of making us take our *selves* too seriously — of causing what Jung calls psychic inflation. In my own experience, the letters and journals — including the letters to an awestruck fan that were later compiled and published as *Letters to a Young Poet* — have this effect more direly than the poems themselves. If, among the poems, the Requiem has this effect more than others, I would say that

this is so precisely because in it he seems so much more like us than he usually does, and because as a result we see Rilke the man far more directly than we do in any other major poem. The sight of Rilke the man, as opposed to Rilke the poet, is often far from edifying.

And after such knowledge, what forgiveness? Seeing through so many of the Requiem's omissions and compromises, can we still see it as a great poem? Still love it?

I think so. But doing so requires that we break the spell of Rilke's monologue, his argument, and attend to the entire poem as a kind of drama of which that argument is a part; that, in other words, we look beyond what it says to what happens in it. In Glück's terms, if Rilke the man denies the actual Paula admission to the poem, substituting a reflection of his ego, we may yet find that she is in fact profoundly present because Rilke the poet has admitted her, not to the poem's closed argument but to its action. If Paula, appearing in the night, has not persuaded the man that he must change his life, isn't it she — the example of her life and work — that has caused the poet, at least in this poem, to change his art in contravention of the very principles he has asserted there so vehemently?

Here is the poem's famous praise for Paula's work — first the still lifes, then depictions of women and children, and finally those shocking nude self-portraits — that Rilke must have seen in May and June of 1906 when she was on her own in Paris after leaving her husband, and he, with time on his hands after being sacked from his position as personal secretary to Rodin, came to her studio daily to sit for his portrait:

> For that is what you understood: ripe fruit.
> You laid it out in bowls in front of you
> and measured out, in colors, the weight of each.
> Women too you saw as fruit, and children,
> impelled from inside toward their destined forms.
> At last you saw yourself as fruit, you took
> yourself out of your clothes and brought yourself
> before the mirror, then let yourself go in,

all but your gaze, so great it stayed outside
and said not: I am that; no, said: this is.
So free of curiosity at last,
your gaze, so free of owning, of such true
poverty, wanting not even yourself: holy.

One of the most striking eccentricities of the Requiem is that, though the shade of Modersohn-Becker, returning, is invisible, the poem does visualize her, and does it in terms of her paintings, in particular those nude self-portraits; a reference further on to the amber beads she wears in nearly all of them is the first bit of evidence that this is so. In many of her nudes of women and children, the models are posed holding pieces of fruit; this is also true of several of the nude self-portraits. But one of these, uncannily like some of her still lifes of fruit, is clearly evoked by the description above: "Self-Portrait as Half-Nude with Amber Necklace I," the more brightly colored of two versions, in preparation for which she had herself photographed in the pose. The pose in the painting, though, is the reverse of the pose in the photograph, indicating that, as with many a self-portrait, a mirror has played a role in its creation, giving Rilke a figure for what he admires about it. Everything else about the painting sustains this reading: the eyes do not appear to look outward, and the body radiates desireless — selfless — and utterly realized immanence. This is the Rilkean ideal the poem praises in Paula's work. To Rilke, in poem after poem in these years, the mirror is not the pool in which Narcissus admired his own reflection; on the contrary, the mirror image, untouchable, not to be entered but undeniably there, is a favorite metaphor for the immaculate unreachable otherness of the true work of art.

This was an ideal for Rilke in his poems as well, yielding the terms in which he valued those thing-poems he had written while learning, after Rodin's example, to *see*. But how can we fail to notice that in this Requiem in which he expounds this ideal to Paula he has done something not only utterly different, but utterly out of keeping with it? Far from working to free the poem from the ego, from desire, from the self, he has used all his rhetorical skill

to persuade us that he is making an utterly personal, subjective, emotional statement.

Having used one painting to praise Paula in the highest possible terms, he uses another to reproach her for the desire that has brought her back to this world that she should willingly have left behind:

> So it is I'd keep you, as you placed
> yourself inside the mirror, deep inside
> beyond all things. Why come so differently?
> Why disavow that, what would you have me believe:
> that in the amber beads around your neck
> some heaviness remained that has no place
> in the mirror of a painting wholly at rest?
> Why show me, by your bearing, some bad omen;
> why display the contours of your body
> as if they were the lines in the palm of a hand,
> which I can see now only as your fate?

The last three lines of this passage make clear that Rilke evokes here, this time in horrified disapproval, another of those nude self-portraits, "Self-Portrait on Her Fifth Wedding Anniversary." "Why come so differently?" he asks, shaken, before describing it; this painting gives him the image for the Paula who has come back from the dead with her plea. In it, draped only at the hips, she frames a swollen belly with her two hands ("display[s] the contours of [her] body"), depicting pregnancy or the desire for it — and thus, from Rilke's vantage-point, foretelling her death. Everything about this painting is subjective and personal: her eyes meet the observer, and she blushes; one of her deepest feelings, the unfulfilled wish for a child that had played a large role in her separation from Modersohn, is literally bared to the world. Further, with the tip of her brush handle Paula has inscribed in the wet paint, "I painted this at thirty years of age on my fifth anniversary [lit. 'sixth wedding-day'], 1906." In the terms in which he has just finished praising the other painting, this one is incorrect and indefensible: all untransformed self, all outside the mir-

ror, all subjective, personal statement. It even has, in the inscription, a first-person narrator who is clearly the artist herself. In this it is very much like the Requiem.

This is what we have to notice: the poem says that it values an art that is impersonal and objective, out of the realm of the ego, in that mirror where it attains an unreachable otherness, but the poem itself is utterly different. What is the force that has elicited from Rilke such an anomalous performance, drawn him in this instance so far out of his usual orbit? The force of the person, the work, the example of Paula Modersohn-Becker. From this viewpoint, it is no longer possible to say that the Other that was Paula is not genuinely present in the poem. All that is atypical and un-Rilkean about this poem is the measure of her invisible, silent but powerful presence in it. A painting that is very much an anomaly in her work has played an important role in calling up a poem that is equally anomalous in his.

If we go beyond seeing the poem merely as the poet's statement, and see it instead as a drama in which the poet, onstage, in response to a visitation by the ghost of someone with whom, to put it mildly, he has unresolved issues, delivers an impassioned, fear-driven, self-justifying monologue in defense of his life, then it takes on far greater depth and is far more compelling. All that is suspect in the monologue becomes part of the drama, and the poem can no longer be faulted for it. We can no longer accuse the poem of being defensive, complacent, closed to the actual Other that was Paula — only the visible man on stage in it, with his desperate reactions to her invisible presence.

It makes a better ghost story, too. If we look only at Rilke's monologue, it is as if Ebenezer Scrooge, visited by the ghost of Jacob Marley, were to lecture him about the failures and errors in his life, persuade him of the rightness of his death, and then send him on his way, without ever recognizing that Marley had a message for *him*, one that Rilke was sometimes prepared to recognize: You must change your life. On the defensive, immured in walls of doctrine, the man who speaks in the poem turns away his fearsome visitor; the poem's maker, on the other hand, has made himself deeply available, quite against his will, to the influence of

her example. That the poem convinces us that both man and maker are indeed Rilke — that we can't dismiss it as a dramatic monologue, a staged set-piece rather than an anguished, failed apologia pro vita sua made in the face of terror — makes the effect that much more contemporary and compelling. This is where the poem's depth and complexity, its anguished tension, its greatness lies.

Charles Wright

CLOUDSPEAK

A long south wind from the Gulf of Mexico sweeps words
From a thousand tree leaves into the color of night.
They will not return.
Like clouds, they drift toward their own occasions.
Like clouds, they are out of here
Silently, no promise, no rebuke,
Their shadows safe in their back humps, their meanings the same —
Unwritten, unlooked upon, unheard,
cloud talk, dreary mumble.

Not one of them gives a damn for us,
Who'd hoped, at least, a couple — a sentence, a stanza —
Might settle themselves in our ink.
Well, not a chance, Ace.
Once gone, they're twice forgotten,
Like weather, and move from the west to the east, wordheads,
Thermaled and ill-lit in the night sky.
Nothing can keep them from flying.

THINKING OF WALLACE STEVENS AT THE BEGINNING OF SPRING

There is so much that clings to us, and wants to keep warm.
Familiar things — the blue sky,
Spring sun,
some dark musician chording the sacred harp,
His spittle of notes
Pressed violets in his still darker book of revelation.

Why do they stay so cold, why
Do the words we give them disguise their identity
As abject weather,
perverse descriptions, inordinate scales?
The poem is virga, a rain that never falls to earth.
That's why we look this way, our palms outstretched,
our faces jacked toward the blue.

IN THE MIRROR IT IS SUNDAY

and the new poem's reducing itself to sex and death,
as they all do, if that's a reduction, which maybe it isn't.

Back arched, one slim wrist behind her neck, she bites
the fat black plum — bright wedge of late morning sun

through the curtain-gap, golden fuzz on her thigh.
Nice little breakdown I'm having, late morning,

late summer, James Brown on the boombox —
good *God* — the day unwinding around us,

movie spilled from its reel. Year of the vain promise,
car wreck, day lilies bent from last night's rain.

2
No more dog metaphors, I keep telling myself.
Oh arrhythmia, three-legged dog — ten years

you've dactylled along at my side, followed me
out to the mailbox, parked your sorry ass at my feet.

Now I'm weepy from too much xanax
(the juice is red, the juice runs down her arm),

the green silk panties phosphorescing on the floor.
I don't know what it means to wake up anymore,

as if I'd taken the wrong train — the landscape
rushing past the window terribly foreign,

terribly new. She bites the plum. The juice runs
down her arm. In the mirror nothing's changed,

the driveway steams, a mockingbird riffs —
half-bar of woodthrush, lick of spotted wren.

3
In the mirror it is Sunday, the breakfast plates
conspire in the sink, the day-moon's thin rationale

chalked above the pine-tops. In the mirror it is Sunday
but the poem won't pay attention — it's in love

with the plum, the red juice, her small, sharp teeth . . .

LETTER FROM THE CARDIAC UNIT

Cigarettes. Drinking. One last hit of acid
back in 1989. Who knows why my heart
jitters off on its own like this —

not the tanned cardiologist, not the pretty intern
who, late last night, pushed a KY'd finger
up my ass for reasons of her own

(my *heart*, I tried to tell her, half asleep
and stoned on xanax — it's my *heart*).
I'm wired, pierced — the monitor's green line

snaggles and bleeps, the i.v. drips heparin
into the back of my hand. The old man
in the next bed doesn't look so good,

pinched in the t.v.'s mushroom light.
There's nothing on in the next life, either —
all Charlton Heston, all the time.

2
Inheritance. Karma. What I deserve.
Old Invisible walks the halls,
shakes up his jar of souls, peers in.

3
My heart is a fluttering, naked thing.
It wants to leap from its lattice of ribs,
fly down the corridor, never come back.

Gossamer, lace — the skin that keeps
this world from leaking into the next.
One minute you're forking a cube

of green Jell-O; next you're motoring off
in your ghost car, turn signal blinking.

4
I want to come back as a harbor seal.
I want to catch a glittering fish in my teeth,
sleep all afternoon on the sand. October,

twilight, sunset burnt to its last magenta strip —
I'll be the dark, inquisitive head in the swell.
Old friend, I'll say. *Unzip that earnest skin.*

The water's cold. Come swim with me.

GO CLEAR

Go clear he said
his high grey 19th c.
postmortem jaw
I loved it its high greyness

go clear no touch
but words no more
death fear

I swam
out of the streaming ikon eyes
who loved me: not-me: no more care
I left the clothes
standing there I swam

into swarming projectless air

redemptionless

from under the earth to over the earth

air to not air

WAKE THE TREE

the tree inside you.
Climb to the top
and see the tall buildings.
They are swaying
in the breeze. They
catch the sun
and gleam. A fleecing
of green covers you, your arms
make a V as if you're lifting
a gray branch to the sky.
Your father stands below
with his camera. He wants
to catch you before you fall
into your mother, into
your woman flesh. Today
you are made of sticks,
lust a leaf pile
behind the wall.
He likes you
this way, before
it all happens, before
the fattening and the blood.
Hold still, he says,
the grass is asleep,
the sky enameled with girl.

AFTER SORROW

The creek stitches
through the park

a mystery
its beginning

where wet first sought wet

from this bridge
we drop our string
of sorrows

down into the drift

where they become
loose and buoyant

sailing past leaves
that try to trap
their float
toward the vaster blue

we didn't imagine
they could navigate
with such ease

never dreamed
they'd fall in love
with each other

rent an apartment
with a view

grow geraniums
on the balcony

throw buckets of suds
across the tile floor

get down on their knees
to scrub

before finding the lace cloth
and lighting candles

call it lack of imagination

we stroll home
bereft

our backs to the moon

HIS GRATITUDE

Women still wed to the living bring casseroles in disposable tins.
When he's finished, he puts them down for the dog
whose licking rattles the tin across the hardwood.
It's a sound like a barn roof when the barn has burned
and the wind comes for the rusted remains, like children
jumping on the hood of a junked car, like static
when the station's gone but the volume's still high.
It is everything he has to say, the work of the tongue
pushing the container across the floor for its next-to-nothings.

OSCILLATING FAN

A relic from the time before AC,
when the heat, even in the dark,
was something nearly visible.

It is making a slow "No."
At one extreme the months are rifled.
Enter, orange and yellow October.

It pans and
the pages are turned in the Bible
left out after the morning devotional.

This thing has a certain passage in mind,
a sentry, checking first the days
and then Deuteronomy.

On the one hand, there's Pilate.
On the other, it's Christmas.
The months preen, adjust their feathers.

The leaves seem to regret their turning.
David, Solomon, September,
the date oil and arrival of the swallows.

Now hurricane season begins
and Pharaoh's army is swept away.
The breeze thumbs up the gospel

and then gets back to a Thursday in June,
creeks loud with runoff, sudden sky,
the light just now let be.

VELOCITY

In the clubcar that morning I had my notebook
open on my lap and my pen uncapped,
looking every inch the writer
right down to the little writer's frown on my face,

but there was nothing to write about
except life and death
and the low warning sound of the train whistle.

I did not want to write about all the scenery
that was flashing past, cows spread over a pasture,
hay rolled up meticulously —
things you see once and will never see again.

So I kept my pen moving by drawing
over and over again
the face of a motorcyclist in profile —

for no reason I can think of —
a biker with sunglasses and a weak chin,
leaning forward, helmetless,
his long thin hair trailing behind him in the wind.

I also drew many lines to indicate speed,
to show the air becoming visible
as it broke over the biker's face

the way it was breaking over the face
of the locomotive that was pulling me
toward Omaha and whatever lay beyond Omaha
for me, all the other stops to make

before the time would arrive to stop for good.
We must always look at things
from the point of view of eternity,

the college theologians used to insist,
from which, I imagine, we would all
appear to have speed lines trailing behind us
as we rushed along the road of the world,

as we rushed down the long tunnel of time —
the biker, of course, drunk on the wind,
but also the man reading by a fire,

speed lines coming off his shoulders and his book,
and the woman standing on a beach
studying the curve of horizon,
even the child asleep on a summer night,

speed lines flying from the posters of her bed,
from the white tips of the pillow cases,
and from the edges of her perfectly motionless body.

THE GREAT WALTER PATER

In the middle of the formal gardens,
laid out with fastidious symmetry
behind the gray stone chateau,
right at the center
where all the gravel paths lead the eye,
at the point where all the hedges
and the vivid flower beds converge
is a small rectangular pond with a flagstone edge,
and in the center of that pond is a statue
of a naked boy holding a jar on one shoulder,
and from the mouth of that jar
a fine stream of water issues forth night and day.

I never for a minute wanted
to be a nightingale or a skylark
or a figure immobilized on the slope of an urn,
but when the dogs of trouble
have me running down a dark winding alley,
I would not mind being that boy —

or, if that is not possible,
I would choose, like the great Walter Pater,
to be one of the large, orange carp
that live under the surface of that pond,
swimming back and forth all summer long
in the watery glitter of sinking coins
and resting all winter, barely moving,
under a smooth, translucent sheet of ice.

ABSENCE

This morning as low clouds
skidded over the spires of the city

I found next to a bench
in a park an ivory chess piece —

the white knight as it turned out —
and in the pigeon-ruffling wind

I wondered where all the others were,
lined up somewhere

on their red and black squares,
many of them feeling uneasy

about the salt shaker
that was taking his place,

and all of them secretly longing
for the moment

when the white horse
would reappear out of nowhere

and advance toward the board
with his distinctive motion,

stepping forward, then sideways
before advancing again,

the moves I was making him do
over and over in my palm.

SECOND MARRIAGE

We were coaxing each other to paradise
and also locked in a game of chess
— each cheating to lose.
Among the caresses
there was one we withheld
with great pride and cunning,
and among the names we called,
incandescent with loss,
some were just cries.

Always the cat watched,
switched the tip of her tail,
and licked one paw,
then the other.

On Court Street, steps receded,
and the cries of children
mimicked each other,
stupid, stupid,
absurdly faint and clear.

The clock ticked scrupulously
as if hoarding a treasure.

Radio music vanished
sad or ecstatic —
all we heard was silence.

We'd come to the world
without us — wrinkled sheet,
bright fading stain,
empty room filling with dawn,
two cloudy wine glasses
touching at base and rim.

A PUZZLE AT SAINT LUKE'S

The sky is the hard part:
no landmark, just the contour
of the next piece,

and does it help that the old man
with the tremor is so shy
he just waits, and waiting suits him,

and it's still snowing
in a high oblique window,
so that the light also trembles?

We want to finish
so we can be released
and wake in our own beds —

we who are almost whole,
almost ourselves, almost foreign
to these absurd back-slit gowns:

and now his lips shake,
framing a word, always the same,
as if that gap were home.

THANKS PRAYER AT THE COVE

A year ago today
I was unable to speak
one syntactically coherent
thought let alone write it down: today
in the dear and absurdly allegorical place
by your grace
I am here
and not in that graveyard, its skyline
visible now from the November leaflessness
and I am here to say
it's 5 o'clock, too late to write more
(especially for the one whose eyes
are starting to get dark), the single
dispirited swan out on the windless brown
transparent floor floating
gradually backward
blackward
no this is what I still
can see, white
as a joint in a box of little cigars —
and where is the mate
Lord, it is almost winter in the year
2000 and now I look up to find five
practically unseeable mallards at my feet
they have crossed
nearly standing on earth they're so close
looking up to me
for bread —
that's what my eyes of flesh see (barely)
but what I wished to say
is this, listen:
a year ago today
I found myself riding the subway psychotic
(I wasn't depressed, I wanted to rip my face off)
unable to write what I thought, which was nothing

though I tried though I finally stopped trying and looked up
at the face of the man
directly across from me, and it began
to melt before my eyes
and in an instant it was young again
the face he must have had
once when he was five
and in an instant it happened again only this time
it changed to the face of his elderly
corpse and back in time
it changed
to his face at our present
moment of time's flowing and then
as if transparently
superimposed I saw them all at once
Ok I was insane but how insane
can someone be I thought, I did not
know you then
I didn't know you were there God
(that's what we call you, grunt grunt)
as you are at every moment
everywhere of what we call
the future and the past
And then I tried once more
experimentally
I focused
on another's face, no need to describe it
there is only one
underneath
these scary and extremely
realistic rubber masks
and there is as I also know now
by your grace one
and only one person on earth
beneath a certain depth
the terror and the love
are one, like hunger, same

in everyone
and it happened again, das Unglück geschah
you might say nur mir allein it happened
no matter who I looked at
for maybe five minutes long enough
long enough
this secret trinity
I saw, the others
will say I am making it up
as if that mattered
Lord,
I make up nothing
not one word.

THE WORD

Like a third set of teeth
or side in a chess match

Thought

and most mysterious
of all, the
matter of thought

the mortal mind thinking
deathless things,
singing

See at it examining
black grains of death
and life — they are the same
thing —
in its open hand

Sweet black green-shadowed grains of soil:
When no one is looking

see it secretly

taste one.

HOMAGE

There are a few things I will miss,
a girl with no shirt on
lighting a cigarette

and brushing her hair in the mirror;
the sound of a mailbox
opening, somewhere,

and closing at two in the morning
of the first snow,
and the words for them.

PASSING

It is now this late evening in April
among first irises and bees I realize
they were opening doors Mary Robert
and William I want to say of clouds sunlight
rain now Didn't we notice the arrows
of hearts hands leaping toward an unmapped
when No age no place though all of one
light Somewhere beneath that cloud
in a little town a white door is opening
maybe for nothing but wind but we will all
one day be there I mean when opening is finally enough

NOVEMBER

Now across the fields there's a wall of gold,
and evenings, if you listen closely enough,
there are faint horn and trumpet sounds.
It's the sun moving through grass
reflecting toward cloud, as the buttery
light of the straw says, "Lay
me down." A boy, invisible to most, is
carrying a plate of brass toward you.
Font of what? And you would like to fill
your pockets with a glow blurring all
specifics with its shine. Hurry, please,
for the boy's growing older. Look, already
there are wrinkles on his hands, around
his eyes. He would like to give you
what you will never entirely have. And
what is that ringing you can feel?

I IMAGINE THE MORTICIAN

I imagine a mortician looks at the hands
first, the lines up toward the fingers,
then down toward the fleshy parts, how
one crevice crosses at an angle
and stops. I imagine this on a summer day.
Or I imagine myself walking early morning,
really early, when it's still half dark,
imagining with each step that poor
mortician in some cool room across town
faced with a slug of a thing — no one
he knows — merely weight now. Or perhaps
I *was* walking, but the thought
stopped me. I didn't dare
look at my hand, its own
scattered lines, webs that go nowhere.
But the mortician? Probably
a bored one too, one who half-hates
his job, whose father and grandfather
made him, he had no choice, not really,
though the hands — they are
interesting, aren't they? It might be
a hobby of his that perks up the whole
awful business, gauging the lifeline
against the real life, watching the years
stop short, then bringing the body
back to the world in his dream
of that body, flashing it back to the yard,
bright sun, garden shears, blackberries.
I walked this morning — that's
the truth of it. How was I to know? The air
only gradually gave up its dark. My mind —
only birdsong entered, sound
like pebbles tied together with string
and trailing off. So I let

the mortician in
with his bent curiosity, the reverse
of the new mother who counts
all the toes and fingers
and is so relieved.

at the zoo — okay: orangutans, albatross, a lion
perfectly bored in her stretch. To that
he closes his book.

How long have I

been dead?

Years, I say because reasonable wants
reasonable. *Fif-teen-years* — dramatic, distinct, three
stresses adrift in silence.

And my wife?

Virginia? I say.

And my house?

A beautiful house, Uncle

though I never saw the last one. Was it
beautiful? Is a squid beautiful?
Is the unbearable reptile whose name —
some tangle in Latin — I can't even pronounce?
I keep nodding. Things get darker
in autumn. You say things anyway, exactly like
leaves do their fall thing
assbackwards in wind, billowing up
after coming straight down. You'd think
they'd stay put. And those trees in the distance,
I'm squinting to read them, their one bright
sadness at a time.

My book! he's
almost shouting over the wide creature racket
of this place, the honk honking, the caw
cawing. He looks down, quiet.
And honest to god, my dead uncle's
reading — say it's *Gulliver's Travels*. Or say
my dead uncle's on page 72
of *Ulysses*. I'll tell you this: my dead uncle
loves Ambrose Bierce.

Uncle? But he's lost to me now.
Do the dead forget? Is it like me

in a dream once, telling my one sweet cat —
Go on, go home now. I already have
a cat. *Forget, to forget,* this *forgetting* thing
all over the place.
I look it up. "To cease
from doing." But one *does* that, right? One
"ceases from doing." You *do*
to *do not*. Inedible phrase!
Dreamsick oxymoron!
ie: Forget
the house. He's the one
who's beautiful, sitting there in his bathrobe
as if this were a porch, a veranda, a certain
rest-his-soul lanai
near a landslide or something.

SMALL YARDS

To get the whole world in there: not just
the mold-sweet birdbath, dry since June. Not simply
the plastic deer broken at the knee,
hoisted to its heroic stance
by a large, rather unpleasant-looking, pockmarked
rock. The world is
richer, way beyond the young man — black or white —
red tails and cap, racist-tacky
or merely tacky, forever offering his lantern
to these autumn days. And what about those
multiple, multi-colored pinwheels
lined up against the weather? Or the shadow guy?
A cutout, no expression, no soul
or whatever passes for it
as he putts the ball across the stillborn, never-
to-be-green concrete of some driveway. A sandtrap?
An imagined sandtrap? He's hopeful still,
if you need a narration. And then, next door
(a sale one time? a 2 for 1?) another shadow guy
climbs a ladder nowhere, his flattest
of brushes raised to paint nothing really, the eternal
bliss of the about-to-be, etcetera, etcetera, world
upon world. Because the whole world
is never whole. Didn't I
know that? But those pink flamingoes. Or the twisted
bonsai, tortured into beauty and grace. Grace!
To get that you might wish a lifetime
at the little well with its little wooden bucket
wound up tight, its depth not
a lake's but a pocket's. A pocket? Magical, who-knows-
what-one-might-find-there, a pocket's
good, yes? It will do, yes? Answer: no.
Answer: I'm just
in my car sometimes. And I see things.

PLASTER OF PARIS HANDS IN A GLASS CASE IN THE HAND SURGEON'S WAITING ROOM

As if the teacher has just asked,
Who wants to erase the blackboards?
and they all do, in their various ways —
ring and middle fingers inseparable, double thumbs,
fingers curled to ram's horns
or grown too long — a rampant branch,
or four, split into two's —
the V in a divining rod.

Across the room, a woman
reads a storybook to her boy.
The father, who's missing a hand,
whose thumb blooms
from the white of his wrist,
runs that thumb
up his son's bare arm and down again,
as if he were touching a sacred manuscript,
or his grandmother's opal earrings,
discovered in a cufflink box —
such is his delight.
The boy pays attention to his mother's voice,
as though nothing remarkable were happening,
the father, registering what a hand can do —
This hand. This hand *per se*.

AT THE THEATRE

When the killer points his gun at her,
the actress, who has no lines for now,
grimaces, tries a helpless grin,
grimaces again, desperate to portray fear.
Her eyebrows shoot up, down, up.
She really wants to get it right.
She's frantic, in fact, like someone ransacking
a bedroom, emptying drawers, pants pockets,
waste baskets in search of a lost wallet.
She wonders why she thought she could act.
Her face goes blank — a stag,
snagged by a bullet, sucking in air.
She knows she's close now.
Her loneliness is making her giddy.
She almost laughs.

THAT SUMMER

Ah, the order of our days —
Nowell on my hip as we walked the beach
past the fifth jetty and back,
our bath and his nap by two,
him in his seat on the back of my bike,
calling, *man, man*
as we passed the small fisherman
in a yellow raincoat
on the roof of 37 Nashua Street.
A stop at Hilliard's for peanut butter fudge.
A story on the porch in the hammock before bed.
The wait for First Star —
But no,
those are the rapist's eyes
I'm remembering, shining
like a shot glass
through the nylon stocking
that lopsided his face.
This is how it is with me —
I can have all of it or none of it.
I can get in the cart and go down
into the mine,
to the candlelit ore and quartz,
or stand back, too far to see.

Vénus Khoury-Ghata

"MY MOTHER WHO RECALLED A BLURRED-OVER DEATH"

My mother who recalled a blurred-over death
said that the light was stubborn
and embarrassed the crowd which turned its back on her

on the dim landing where voices bustled
her body plunged in grief separated itself from the bedding
the creaking of the floorboards revealed the movements of
floor-buffing angels
tedious preparations for one who pursued her breath barking
a sympathetic hand flung a stone at her across a sob

My mother had paired her basil with the forest oak
inviting it Easter after Easter to share the lamb's grass and
bleating
and to verify against its height if we had grown along with
the lamp
which pushed the sun back behind the hedges
when maternal fingers tucked up a lock of wavy hair

The shutters looked regretful
when my mother read the cards for the night
the king of hearts atop the ten of diamonds
meant moving
the jack of clubs who was afraid of dying
kept his distance from the queen of spades
whom he only knew by her profile

The house was on the edge of the road as on the edge of tears
its windows ready to burst into sobs

"THE SALT MY MOTHER TOSSED IN HER OVEN"

The salt my mother tossed in her oven
unleashed flame-tongues
and stretched our bodies as far
as Lake Baïkal
the banks of the Euphrates
and the Amazon

We had brought back blue toucans in our hair
breadfruit trees between our teeth
we had eaten acid fruit which made the table screw up its face
chewed red grass which gave the walls hallucinations

In my mother's oven the rumor-bearing winds set on each other
the Amazon's rivers immolated themselves in the Atlantic
the bells of Tibet strangled in their own ropes

we listened to all the grievances
we sympathized

"WE STOLE KISSES FROM THE HOLY PICTURES"

We stole kisses from the holy pictures
hasty embraces from the cherry tree
plumes from the fog seated on our doorstep

We were highwaymen in the dry season
petty thieves in the rainy season when rivers climbed into our bedrooms
we had committed numerous pilferings with angel accomplices
stolen sticks of incense from the cypress
chalk from the dawn
tears from the cemetery walls

We were grandiloquent fabulists
we uprooted minutes from the clock
and recited our ages backwards

"ALL LOGIC'S ORDER MELTED WITH THE ROOF"

All logic's order melted with the roof
we applauded the rain falling between our walls
fervently mended rips in the spider-webs

We were fetishists
irreverent
my mother read the cards for mockingbirds
my father slapped the sand
slapped God
when the clouds bled
on the bent back of the sky

Our salvation came from nature
we would trap the rednesses of autumn
the destitution of winter
we would end up in tendrils
in firewood-bundles
to affront the brief rage of the conifers

translated by Marilyn Hacker

MISTRESS HERE

Old underbitch gets a
biscuit, yah my new tricks
rivet the kids, as if a
God granted prayers, a
pony instantly bedside, the
bully next door burst into flames.
They adore me & tug me
quick upstairs to their inscrutable rooms.
Thus does my tenure already
turn to the good. It keeps a
wife pleased as well below at her stitch,
a motto coming along into its own
curly letters entwined. What a
flourish of charities begins
at this home in her name! She will
kiss & primp them & bustle each abroad.

On the contrary,
not the half of it;
hand over quaint hand old
mother-smitten invisible
sister help haul the buckets up of our
heart blinking cheeky frogs: I'm
paying you for it in real children.

WIDOWWALK

Find what's left of him derelict, ready
to rig for moonlight and the exotic flags,
now that successions of snails
lay gloss along the ribcage his pride
had once to ride in. Whitewash work
some few weeks yet, then set him sail.

Season of inflammation
in the canopy, leaves in tailspins,
augury of cargo into every bone hold
hoist and fast, bright
maple lading, the Indian pipe,
sometimes a toad,

and the pomanders of gall and balm:
accurately the rain weighs and stows.
Easy does his most intimate drudgery —
were it I so busy, belovedly;
as it is, care and courtesy
of the hired spider,

and a brisk North wind
to rabblerouse among the wild geese,
strong and splendid arrivals
who wobble our poor pond, preening
the luck from his broken hair
into their wings.

GENERATIONS

For death mother had to leave off dying.
Her other unfinished works — & I
myself among them — that she hadn't
quite kept up, evidently would never do.
I spelled her last notes to one another
& over repeatedly for any clue.

Some years later, freak-accidental
intuition caught my heart, that I'd quit
my own peculiar daughter:
I tended, instead, some likelier one
she was once or wasn't, figment of mine.
I picked up exactly the dear thread.

VISITATION

Small knots of form, grey against
grey,

an unnerving calm at the window,
long crows
not going anywhere.

Everything concentrated like
metal in the blood.

The dead lose their ages,
        their eyelashes,
        their bright ideas.
Shiny fingers curl
as if they want me to hear something.

Maybe a joke.

POEM WITH BRAIDS IN IT

No more consonants, now, the alphabet
is pure vowel, and geese
waddle west in this mud,

this soft serve, opening their wings
now and then, as if to say,
in their aloey jargon,

who's boss. Already
a balmy phonics descends; the locust blossoms,
those pea-shaped buggers, those

millennium falcons, swim
through its trickster palette, looking
for the tea in which the world steeps,

in which noise
chases noise through lives
haunted by new flaws, new flaccidities

and an honest, down-
to-earth rain. Meanwhile, up-country,
between the oaks,

the ostrich ferns offer their ancient scrolls
with flimsical precision,
& Little Dogwood Creek braids

its bubbly logistics, pummeling
the azalea clean
as sleep, or the impulse

to reveal the impulse
by running from it. Here's
to the basket-weave of the greenbriar.

Here's to the indian cucumber's split-level rendering
of starfish. Here's to the tumbledown acoustics,
the caddisfly, the constant

participling. Here's
to the carnal life, the leaves
folded like dozing bats.

SKINK

I watched you
change colors in the Florida sun.
Your quickness blistered me,
the throb in your jowl,
how your toes clung to wall and screen alike.
But then your tail was my youth
and I wanted it. Some kind of cave
collapsed in me. I saw
the day-glo newts
that saved me in the woods
where I tried to die.
I saw the hellbender, which I've looked for,
looked for, and never seen,
and the dusky and spotted salamanders.
At once it seemed you were the handwriting
on a document I'd have read to me
by some official of the government, or doctor,
the fine print. I saw you
look at my daughter each time
she sighed, and did not offer her to you.
It was clear that the darts
in your skull were the same as my father's,
and mine. Resemblances,
so what. I did not begrudge
that later you would sleep
buried to your ears
in spanish moss. I did not even wonder,
reptile, if it would be green or red,
your tail, strung on a line
around my neck,
or just that strange, courteous yellow.

Amy Schroeder

RIGHT, RIGHTER, RIGHTEST

I
My friend hisses
"No one thing can be all things to a person,"
and then looks at me,
sideways.

I think,
"Well, I never wanted it to be all —
just much communion,
movie love, and mimsy..."

II
That you wanted to be left alone,
that you wanted to be a part of something —

How weak you are,
caught always with your sour face and sore wrist,
just another limp leaf on the clematis vine.
A writer.

III
The girl reclines. She leans, lee of the stone, *la la la*,
lean-to shack built up against the lie of the house.
Tar paper and cut-bits of cardboard: Ketchup. Green Beans. Toilet paper.
She thinks she is better than everyone else.
She may be right.

IV
The frog leaps out of water;
the water falls back on itself.

HOMESICK

Her mother misusing the word *elegiac;*
her father calling himself stupid —
She runs a tongue over her teeth, thinking
anchorite, cenobite, bite down —

Corn on the cob, pork loin, tri-tip roast; fish, never.
The dog on the lawn, humping his pillow.
The back yard: eugenias and junipers,
browning fescue. Avocados,
azaleas dying in-to-out,
eight star sky.
The house, the house, the house.

John the Baptist ate bugs, she says to no one in particular.
Locusts, I think.

She was one of, and her sister beside,
giggling in and out. Breathing.

Winstons held beneath the table, smoke blown to the side.
Flower arranging — a large spiky blue flower
no one knew the name of, looked like a peacock,
or like the jay that used to snipe at the cat,
actually plucking tufts like a crane diving for fish.

Someone slips on the mossy bricks. Someone laughs.
Someone blows out the candles, turns on the Jacuzzi,
models the new clothes. Someone covers her mouth.

Way back then, when we used to fight, she thinks, *at least then we . . .*

Dessert. Desert. Be certain.

Angela Ball

OUR INSTITUTE OF THE SUPERFICIAL

Surfaces are wonderful, wonderful to look at people
Without knowing them.

To know shapes, instead:
A tree which begins to resemble lightning,
A stately garbage can, a man walking along in pants
Made of billows of inky stripes
Like a dream jail, a sunset that surrounds us
With party cake.

There are tarps I could lift,
But don't. I'd rather drape
All information with a crisp napkin.

Why think *in*
When you can think *around*,
In swoops that grow only more extravagant.

From now, whatever happens
Will be secretary of your heart:
A continuous backbone of trains — or, overhead, an airplane
Prolonging its famous gutter-ball sound.

For your studies, you'll search endlessly, happily, greedily
For the subject that snatches all subjects, knocks them flat.

OUR BIG RIVER

Living next to our river is like living next to thoughts,
Pouring day and night, glaucous.

Skin crawls this way and that
Without our knowing it.

Because we needed objectivity,
A power plant was built.

All the famous painters submitted their designs.
De Chirico won. It is his summer and winter home,

With its wild tunnel through air
And its special plaster.

Now we can name the stars: Elmer White, Bernice Burns, etc.,
As the case may be, and receive
A special certificate.

Now we can see how the world gets divided:
Light and smoke.

We're going with the smoke.

ONE MORE

Say I had
a calf
I had to guide through the city,

old snow
in the curbs and fresh
nakedness on the branches
of each

fenced-off tree along
the avenues, black man
repeating to no one, everyone,
You got a problem?

You got a problem?
Leading a dewy-eyed young
calf through the traffic,
bastards

staring into its
lake-silt eye, one

then the other,
isn't a cakewalk, isn't
a walk in the park, isn't going
anywhere

among the strange bawling
of cars, water-trucks,
horns. Here,

say to it, say to it,
one more look.

One more look and
we must go.

WREN

Once I fished a wren
from the pool
held it

little volt
in my hand

This I won't forget:

my mother's shoulders

I'm in the backseat
holding my brother's hand

my sister is driving

I don't have to see
anyone's face

the box of ashes
queerly heavy
like metal

like
the soaked sleeve of your sweater

long ago

the way something would rather drown
than trust

the hand that would lift it

ANSWER

Yes, I'd go back —

to the day
I was almost born
to the false alarm

that brought a cop
to the motel room
to wake my father

and to the night drive
through the spring snowfall

black outside
a little blue light on the dash

but it was Not
Yet —

it was Too Soon —

I was born in May,
but I would leave them there

with the breath and the April snow
with the waiting
with the beginning

my happiness
so great
I'd never come . . .

COLERIDGE, AGAIN

"For he on honey-dew hath fed,
and drunk the milk of paradise."

First it's a palace with wine at bedside.
And then it's a square of canvas
and the dregs of a Harvey Wallbanger.
At first it's the milk of paradise,
and then it's paradise milked.
It's honey dew and it's honey did and it's honey don't.
It's not the first time he has slept and dreamed
and awakened from a vision,
a nervous passenger
reading too much
into the flight literature.
A hand knocks.
The planet reels.
The pleasure palaces ride into place.
The mind's mirror tips and flashes
toward the roof of his mouth.
The dream's honey flows over his tongue.
The art of poetry is the art of the interruption.

WOMEN WITH PUTTI

As if they're attachments,
fleshlies.
They're not children so much as sentient
buttocks that float or
her future embryos,
charging, insistent. . . .
These companions
look out of the whole oily business,
these soft cloven hooves
turned inside out,
these most buoyant citizens,
their soft hands paddling the canvas
of their lovely grandame.
To look is to
fund a bank of them,
anarchists armed with bows and arrows at the gullet,
honeyed to every pore with mischief,
dimpled with incipient knowledge,
not a death's head
but a life's head:
the very tips of the nervous system unfurled unclenched
    blossomed and given
intelligence.

INDISPENSABLE SIGN

Under the bank of fountains
in the cavern
between the rounded steps some man

is — what can I say —
showing himself to us?
The funny way we say it:

exposing himself,
as if he were a strip of film.
I had been staring into the distance

and drew up startled.
A sign beneath the stone pediments.
The perch of meaning.

One interjection. One more
dying argument.
How many bodies are piled

on a field, or a bed,
before a language curls like
a million fernheads?

How many turnings,
how much urgent mayhem
to make a culture?

CONTRIBUTORS

ANGELA BALL's most recent book is **The Museum of the Revolution** (Carnegie Mellon, 1999). She teaches in the Center for Writers at the University of Southern Mississippi, where she is an editor for the *Mississippi Review*.

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We regret that notes on two contributors to the Spring 2000 issue were omitted:

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Fred Herzog, Canadian/canadien. Born/Né: Germany, 1930
silver print (colour)/épreuve (couleur) sur papier aux sels d'argent
20" x 24"
Courtesy, the artist/prêt de l'artiste

from **EXPOSURE**: *canadian contemporary photographers*, organized and circulated by the Art Gallery of Ontario, Extension Services, 1975-1977.
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